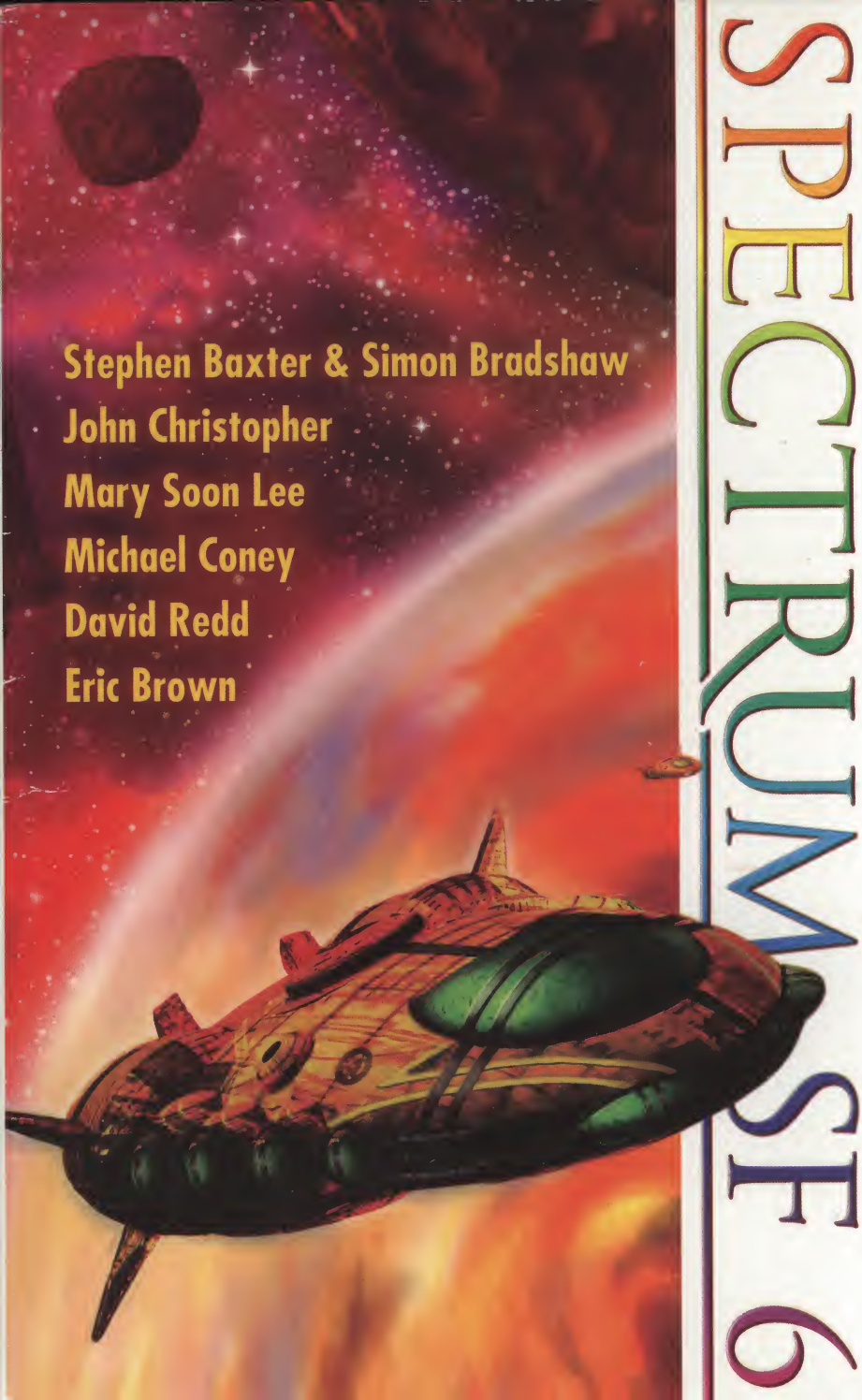
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Editorial

As you will no doubt have noticed there has been a significant change to the external appearance of Spectrum SF. Apart from this, things are pretty much the same (the issue is late, I'm falling even further behind with my reviewing – but there is still some good fiction to be had!)

Why the change? Well, it hasn't been easy securing bookshop orders or a distributor for the magazine and I suspect that this may have something to do with the fact that Spectrum SF doesn't *look* like a SF magazine. So, we'll give this a go and see how we get on. Thanks to Dominic Harman for supplying artwork I could use at short notice and to Paul Brazier for the redesign of the cover. Paul, whose name you will recognise from Interzone, will be in charge of the mechanical production of the cover in future issues while I inflict my choice of artwork upon you.

Finally, a few corrections from the last issue, courtesy of David Pringle and Andrew Breitenbach: the short version of A Case of Conscience didn't win the short fiction Hugo but the book did win the novel Hugo in 1959; Michael Coney won the BSFA Award for Brontomek! not Hello Summer, Goodbye. And the missing title for Wil McCarthy's book was Bloom.

See you next issue.

Paul Fraser, Editor & Publisher

This is Stephen Baxter and Simon Bradshaw's latest entry in a very occasional series about alternate British space programs (the only other story so far is PROSPERO ONE, INTERZONE *112, October 1996). Those who are interested in the BIS Lunar spaceship design used in this story can find it in* THE JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH INTERPLANETARY SOCIETY, *January and July 1939.*

Stephen Baxter's latest books are a collection of science essays, DEEP FUTURE, *and the third volume in his series about mammoths,* ICEBONES, *both from Gollancz.*

FIRST TO THE MOON!

STEPHEN BAXTER & SIMON BRADSHAW

I

By the time the spin had ramped up, Gregory Marsh was being swung around the axis above his head once every three and a half seconds, as if by an immense rope wrapped around his chest. Though he was never going to get used to the sideways tug on his innards and head, he could tell that the big space-ship was spinning away with scarcely a wobble, ready to fly as steady and stable as a bullet out of a rifle, and providing its crew with artificial gravity to boot.

It was the second of July 1950 – a Sunday lunchtime, for God's sake – and today Marsh, with Forbes and Selbourne, was going to ride into the sky aboard this unlikely five-thousand-ton firecracker, ride in fact all the way to the bloody moon.

He was on his back, strapped to his heavy form-fitted couch, looking up into the roof of the life-container. The little spam-can-shaped cabin was just ten feet across, and it contained the three of them lying here like Isle of Man legs, heads together at the centre, feet to the wall.

Selbourne couldn't resist yakking. "How's the plumbing, Gregory?"

As the nearest thing to a medico aboard the *Scott*, Francis Selbourne had a right to ask such questions, and for once Marsh was prepared to

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forgive his plummy Oxbridge tones. "I wish I hadn't shipped that last helping of steak in butter."

"Doctor's orders."

"More like fattening for the slaughter…"

"Now, now, chaps," Forbes murmured. Captain Bernard Forbes, RN, sounded characteristically sober, and when Marsh glanced up he saw the unlit pipe clamped in the pilot's mouth as Forbes ran through final instrument checks. Marsh felt a sting of irritation to be dismissed like a schoolboy. But he subsided; there were rather more important concerns afoot.

There was a sharp rise in the noise of pumps spinning, of relays clattering. The tempo of events was picking up, and his heart beat harder in response.

He couldn't see out, of course, because of the Boost Protection Cover that enclosed the fragile life-container. It would have been a peculiar pleasure to see the bright blue sky above Ascension Island swivelling over his head, maybe even to glimpse the viewing bunker containing King Edward and Prime Minister Halifax and the Reich Ambassador and the rest of the brass, all of them no doubt gazing open-mouthed at the sight of this huge hexagonal pillar spinning around on its vast turntable like a Glenn Miller platter.

"Thirty seconds, gentlemen," came the voice from the command bunker.

"Roger, thank you," Forbes murmured smoothly. "Firing key to go. Air purging. Steering rockets on idle run. And three, and two, and one—"

There was a distant rumble, like a storm far off in the Atlantic. But this storm was man-made: the ignition of the cells in the lowest Step of rockets a hundred feet below them, aluminium burning in an oxygen-rich binder.

"Full shat, by God," Forbes called. "Blast-off!"

There was no kick in the pants; nothing weighing five thousand tons was going to leap from the ground like a gazelle. Marsh felt oddly deflated. The last few months, as the King's Englishman-on-the-moon deadline had approached, had been a period of unbelievably intense work for him and thousands of others. Now that the rockets were burning at last, he felt somehow as if the job were already over.

But everything was going according to the book. Marsh didn't need instruments to tell him that: he could hear the singing of the rockets,

all one hundred and sixty-eight of them clustered in that first Step, each an exquisite piece of engineering birthed in the factories of Derby and Southampton and each destined for just a few minutes' once-only use. The rocket cells were fired in their elaborate sequence by the electrical control he had laboured over so long – as many relays as a flying telephone exchange, as the *Daily Mail* had put it.

He felt a mounting exhilaration. Forbes might be in the pilot's seat, but *Scott* – as much as it was anybody's – was Marsh's ship.

Soon there came a distant rattle. A new thrust regime cut in, sharper and noisier than the first.

"First Step away," Forbes called. Already the first of the *Scott*'s six Steps of clustered rockets had burned out, the cells falling away like snowflakes.

Selbourne laughed tightly, his voice shaking. Perhaps it was just the vibration. "Marsh, let's hope none of those bloody petrol cans of yours end up clouting King Edward on the bonce."

"As long as it demolishes his Nazi buddies I couldn't care less—"

"Ground, this is *Scott*. Going to manual." Forbes could fire individual rocket cells by working a bank of switches on the gantry above his head, a slab of polished wood that always reminded Marsh of the console of a church organ.

More rattles and bangs as the cells of the second and third rocket Steps burned up. The press of acceleration became more intense. But that sharp sideways vibration, with them since blast-off, was getting stronger.

Selbourne called, "What the bloody hell, skipper?"

"Misfires," Forbes snapped briskly, focusing on the banks of switches. "Just one or two cells each Step, but enough to knock us sideways. I'm compensating, but it's a tightrope walk, every inch of the way."

The ride smoothed a little as he worked. The rockets, set in their individual fixings, were supposed to orient themselves to compensate for the atmosphere's savage buffeting. But no electronic gadget yet devised could possibly make assessments and steering corrections as rapidly as a human pilot. And Marsh had to admit that Forbes, for all his smug pomposity, was about as fine a pilot as you could hope to fly with.

But Selbourne said now, "So much for Korolev, Marsh. Eh? Send him back to that Nazi mine in Siberia where he belongs."

Marsh bit back a sharp rejoinder. Not the time or place, he told himself. But the fact was it had been the Russians who had made the design possible.

The *Scott*, the finest fruit of the Imperial Space Programme, was based on outline schemes devised by a bunch of visionary eccentrics called the British Interplanetary Society back in '39. The decision to use small solid rockets, over two thousand of them, as the basis of the design was based on a long British tradition of the use of such rockets for military purposes. But in the later stages much of the detailed work and testing had been done by Sergei Korolev and his handful of rocketry and aeronautical engineers, who had been snatched out of imploding Russia just before German and Japanese troops had met at the Urals in 1944. For all Selbourne's snobbish cracks, without the Russians' genius and sheer doggedness, none of this would have come to fruition.

Another clatter of discarded canisters, another sharp ignition: that had been the fourth Step. Now the fifth and last Step must be lighting up, another one hundred and sixty-eight cells burning furiously. Ironically the acceleration was heavier than ever, the surges more powerful – and the vibration terribly severe. Marsh wondered uneasily if all this rattling around would have any longer-term consequences for the ship's more fragile systems.

And then, without warning, the rockets cut out. Marsh, with a grunt, was thrown sideways against his restraining harness. The vibration quickly damped away.

Forbes said, "Hold on to your hats." Marsh heard valves clatter open, a booming echo like a cannon shot. That was the steam thruster, a small subsidiary system meant for steering and attitude adjustment; Forbes was trying to fix the out-of-kilter rotation.

When the ship at last settled down, the three of them lay back, breathing hard, heads close together. The vibration and noise had gone, but still they were being spun around by the ship's stabilising rotation. With 'down' now pointing outwards to the life-container's circular wall, it was as if Marsh were sitting up in his couch, with Selbourne and Forbes suspended upside down over his head like two meaty chandeliers.

There was a sharp, unexpected crack all around the cabin. Sunlight flooded in through a port. The Boost Protection Cover, its job done, had split into orange-peel segments and fallen away.

Marsh leaned forward in his seat. He could just reach the coelostat, an ingenious gadget of mirrors and lenses that was able to counteract the ship's spin and afford him a steady view. At first he saw only darkness – no stars – and he wondered if the device was faulty. Then a brilliant white-blue slab swam into view. He gasped at its unexpected beauty. But the earth was already folding over on itself and falling away from him.

Forbes snapped on the radio set, and as he waited for the valves to warm he spoke clearly. "This is HMS *Captain Robert Scott* calling Farnborough. *Scott* calling Farnborough…"

There had been much anguished debate about the wisdom of taking even one military officer along on this mission, let alone putting him in command. What if the Reich took it as a provocation? After all there was a great deal of tension at various pressure points around the world between the British Empire and the Axis powers – for instance in India, threatened by the Italian occupation of Afghanistan. But the brass had cut through that; when the chips were down you needed a pilot who had proved himself in the most demanding of situations, physically and mentally. Just as Forbes had proved himself as a Fleet Air Arm pilot over southern England in a Miles M-52, a supersonic jet aircraft that was nothing but a tube of flaming kerosene, flying up against incursions of British air space by the Reich's own rocket-powered Messerchmitt Komets flying out of Calais. And now, in this moment of glamour, here was Forbes rising to the occasion once again.

"We are beyond the pull of earth, and are bound for the moon. All of us are feeling fine, and you can tell the boffins that the kite has performed as per, despite my clumsy handling…" The tone of his voice – and the carefully judged, self-deprecating humour – seemed designed to cement Forbes into English folklore forever, alongside his idol, the Antarctic explorer Scott.

Marsh couldn't blame him for it, even as he lay here ignored in the ship he had built, like a troglodyte in this spinning cave.

Without warning, Selbourne coughed up a ball of vomit. "Oh, Christ."

"And to top it all," Forbes told the listening millions, "I bit through my blessed pipe."

Marsh started to laugh. And once they had all started, it proved impossible to stop.

II

A small alarm clock sounded. Time for another sighting. Marsh leaned back and pressed his eye to the coelostat, and waited for dark adaptation to cut in.

He had rather enjoyed his first few hours outbound.

He felt at home in the life-container. It was a shell of fabric stiffened with resin, and the only light came from small electric bulbs, so that the atmosphere was oddly cosy, like a late-night campsite. But he was surrounded by complexity, by a 'knitting' of pipes and wires taped to the walls and instruments clustered in the gantry behind his head at the axis of the life-container, all laced with the scent of engine oil and ozone. It was an exhilarating, reassuring melange for an old tin-cutter like Marsh.

But of course the flight's one big problem had quickly come to the fore.

It wasn't the continuing Coriolis nausea in this little spinning washtub of a ship. It wasn't the lingering lavatory odours that the carbon dioxide scrubbers resolutely failed to remove from the air. It wasn't the wind-inducing 'high-energy' foods they were consuming – bread and butter, cheese, porridge, chocolate, all eaten off dung-coloured Bakelite crockery. It wasn't even the gagging odour of Forbes' expensive German nicotine-free pipe tobacco, smoked in defiance of all regulations and common decency.

No, the problem was Marsh's crewmates, as simple as that. Only three days into this three-week mission, and Marsh could cheerfully have strangled the pair of them.

He tried to concentrate on what was important: that he was after all *here*, suspended between earth and moon – he, Gregory Marsh.

In 1942, after the dubious conclusion to Britain's European war, the King had made his famous BBC broadcast in which he had called for the 'national genius' for high engineering to be assembled 'to place an Englishman on the moon by the end of this decade'. This great feat would be a monument to the recovery of Britain's spirit. And such a recovery was needed. Even though the European war might have become a disastrous, unwinnable conflict – certainly if the rumours about immense 'atomic bomb' explosions in the depths of Kazakhstan were true – there had been no particular honour in Prime Minister Halifax's compromises with the Reich, made with the grinning Germanophile Edward VIII at his side.

The King's challenge had struck a chord. Maybe it was time to restore a little national pride, and a race to the moon would certainly be a harmless way to beat the Germans – and it had given Gregory Marsh the opportunity of a lifetime.

Marsh could feel the reassuring mass of his slide rule at his belt. That battered old instrument, the slider carefully greased at least once a week, had been with him since his first day in the shipyards of his native North-East as a technical apprentice and every step of his long journey, all the way to the threshold of the moon. In his mid-20s he had been lured down to London to take an engineering degree at Imperial College. Despite his sour relations with the other students – mostly southern-based, fashionably quoting German – he had had little trouble graduating with distinction, and had moved on to the Royal Aircraft Establishment in Farnborough, where he had become an expert in the new field of space engineering.

As the great lunar programme had been assembled, Marsh had battled to become one of the King's 'new Brunels'. He had survived a long and fraught selection process, where his obvious technical superiority had overcome the handicap of his background, his accent and his 'sullen attitude'. And now here he was, on his way to the moon.

He did wonder, though, if Von Braun's mighty rockets required slide rules to guide themselves into space and back.

Pale grey light poured into his eye. He blinked, annoyed with himself. He had let the moon come drifting into his field of view; now his dark adaptation was ruined good and proper.

But still, here was the moon, as big as a dinner plate, swimming towards him out of nothingness. He could recognise the very craters, plains and mountains that he had explored as a boy with a home-made refractor from the tiny yard of his terraced house. He would never walk there – that wasn't his job – but to get so close was good enough for him.

He turned the coelostat away and got down to work.

Marsh's key role during the four-day lunar flight was navigation: to figure out where the ship was and where it was headed. With his small telescopes and sextants he took fixes on stars and on features on the earth – notably flares sent up from the planet's night side, with pinpoint timing and placement, by a small fleet of Royal Navy vessels scattered around the globe.

The observations made, he got on with his analysis, using log tables

and a hand-cranked calculator. His calculations were basically data reduction to convert his sightings into a form compact enough for easy Morse transmission. The big computers at Manchester and Bletchley would do the real number-crunching, factoring his data in with that from the micrometer-measured photographic plates that charted their celestial progress.

It took an hour's intense labour. Marsh finished by cross-checking the result against his rough slide-rule estimate, then summarized it on a message form. In little over two hours, back would come any required course correction. It was satisfying, stretching, absorbing work.

When he was done, Selbourne came sliding his couch around the rails that circled the cabin. He held up a sample bottle. "Time to give for the orphans again."

Marsh groaned. More medico nonsense. With a sigh, he shut his rice-paper almanacs, log tables, maps and charts away inside his big draughtsman's folder. He took the bottle and clambered down below his chair into the storage space at the bottom of the life-container, stumbling a couple of times through Coriolis force, seeking privacy. Down here he could hear the hum of the air-conditioning plant and feel the heat of the steering-jet boiler, mounted with other equipment under the lower deck plate. Close to the machines, he felt rather more at home than with Selbourne and Forbes.

And, as he forced himself to pee in controlled dollops into the ludicrously small bottle, he could see how the light of the moon gleamed out of the eyepiece of his coelostat.

He was unceremoniously kicked in the head.

"Sorry about that." Forbes, tumbling around the cluttered space, was going through his space-suit drill. He had already donned his pressure jerkin. Now, with enviable agility, he had raised up his legs and was sliding them smoothly into the lower half of his thick, multi-layered suit.

Selbourne, peering down from the upper level, smiled. "Rather like getting dressed in the dark in the dorm, don't you think, skipper? – but I do think it would have been better if we could have practised with these bloody things *before* we left England."

Marsh's sanguine mood had evaporated. Selbourne's public-school bilge always infuriated him. And anyhow, his head still hurt. "Yes, Forbes," he groused. "Exactly *why* was it we weren't allowed to see these damn suits before we left the ground?"

"You know why," Forbes said neutrally. "Operational security."

"Ah, yes. We can't have German spies stealing the secrets of British pressure suits, can we?"

Selbourne eyed Marsh mockingly. "Methinks a touch of envy on the part of our grease monkey."

"Don't patronise me, you bugger," Marsh snapped. "I mean, what bloody sense does it make to exclude your crew from essential details of the mission? What did you think I would do – tell Mr Churchill so he could write it up in the *New Yorker*?"

Selbourne said, "You know, old man, your accent gets stronger when you're angry. Rather quaint."

"Selbourne—"

"You should concentrate on your job, Marsh, not faded old has-beens and never-weres like Churchill. Did you hear what they had to say about him at the reception at Buck House? King Edward can't stand Churchill, not after that dreadful business when Churchill spoke up about the King's liaison with that American lady, and a King is a good enough judge for me… Ah, but I forget. You weren't invited to the Palace, were you, Marsh?"

Marsh's blood boiled. It was just as it had been from the day he had first set foot in London and he had found himself confronting the seamless super-class that linked the higher echelons of society in Britain, Germany and elsewhere. It was a class from which working-class 'northern chemist' Marsh, regardless of his ability and achievement, was forever excluded – along with other such unmentionables as Slavs, kikes and coloureds.

So he lashed out. "As for the King, I only wish Cromwell had done a more thorough job. And you know, Francis, you might have given away a few secrets yourself. All those Nazi pen-pals… Careless talk costs lives, you know."

Selbourne stiffened. It was well known that Selbourne had spent a year pursuing medical research in Berlin during the Empire-Axis détente of the late 1940s. But in polite society it was considered rather tasteless to refer too closely to a person's contact with the Reich or their Axis partners. Selbourne snapped, "Sometimes, Marsh old man, you go too far. Just too far."

The spat might have got worse – even physical, as it so often had for Marsh at Imperial and Farnborough. But Forbes, with unexpected managerial skill, distracted them both by showing them how to apply

a simple patch to the space-suit. A score draw, Marsh decided, not unpleased.

That was the two of them for you: Forbes haughty and somehow lacking a soul, and Selbourne clever, edgy, but with a fragility it wasn't hard to pierce. At least you could respect Forbes for his obvious competence. Selbourne seemed nothing but a dilettante: a jack of all trades, doing this and that, everything from material science to physiology. That, with a little medico training, had apparently been enough to get him through the programme. To Marsh, who had been through such a ferocious selection process, it was infuriating. He could think of a dozen men he'd sooner have at his side than Selbourne.

Or Forbes, come to that.

III

Beyond the windows the mountains of the moon slid past, wrinkled like burnt flesh.

As the flight entered its final hour, the three of them laboriously squeezed themselves into their cumbersome space-suits: sleek surface-exploration models in the case of his crewmates, a rather clumsier design for Marsh.

But before one could land one had to stop: stop dead above the moon's bony mountains, and fall vertically to the ground.

"Confirm secure for de-spin." Forbes' voice came, crackling slightly, through the earphones of Marsh's helmet. "Thruster valves *open*, tanks *pressurized*, de-spin rockets to *arm*... firing on my mark... three, two, one, *mark*." The solid-rocket de-spin motors fired with a bang, like someone striking the outer hull with a hammer. There was a sudden twist and lurch, much more pronounced than the turntable spin-up.

And then came the rising-stomach sensation of weightlessness, for the first time in the flight.

No time for queasiness; they all had work to do. The job for Marsh and Selbourne now was to collect the data that would allow Forbes to complete the landing. Marsh pulled the lever by his left thigh. Springs and pneumatics rotated his couch until he was sitting near 'upright' in the cabin. He pulled forward the rangefinder sight, like a submarine periscope. He twisted the focus until the grey blur resolved itself into a view of the craters and valleys of the Altai Mountains, a tract of ancient highland.

An adjustment of another control, and a superimposed graticule neatly bracketed two prominent craters. "Sight One," Marsh called, thumbing the stopwatch button. He watched as the craters drifted apart, until their edges slid past a wider set of graticule lines. "Sight Two: thirty-four seconds."

"Roger." Invisible behind Marsh, Selbourne would be consulting his tables frantically. He already knew the *Scott*'s speed, so the rate of approach observed by Marsh could be converted into an altitude, and from that the time of retro-firing could be determined.

Marsh waited out the endless seconds until Selbourne reported. At his controls, Forbes was a stolid presence, apparently unconcerned. This was how it must be, all the way to the surface: with no electronic aids, only the hands, eyes and brains of the three men working together could bring them safely down.

Still the moon closed. Suddenly the grey landscape was no longer Marsh's childhood friend: now it was a solid barrier, against which they would smash themselves given the slightest error—

Concentrate, man!

At last Selbourne called, "Burn One at mark plus one hundred – *mark*."

Marsh slid his couch back to prone.

Forbes murmured, "Five, four, three—"

Suddenly noise erupted beneath them – the final rocket-cell Step was just beneath the life-container's hull plates – and a hammer blow struck Marsh's chest, four gravities that pinned him down. And then, just as suddenly, the noise was gone, and the weight on his chest evaporated.

Couch upright again, panting, Marsh peered through the range-finder. He scanned quickly, looking for one of several pairs of small craters that had been mapped out around the landing site. In training, he had practised site recognition repeatedly with randomly oriented photos. Now all he saw was a random jumble of grey and black…

There. "I've got Pair Delta." He repeated his earlier timings.

Selbourne ruled a quick line across his landing nomogram, calculating both height and rate of descent. He reported promptly, but his voice trembled. "Forty-two thou, eight hundred down."

Forty-two thousand feet: eight miles up, heading down at five hundred miles an hour – and accelerating at five feet per second squared. That was a bit low, but speed was on the button.

Forbes said laconically, "Burn Two in ten on my mark."

This time they remained upright; the second firing was gentler, just under one normal gravity. As Marsh watched his screen, the rate of closure visibly slowed until the landscape was almost static in front of him.

Burnout. Two and a half miles above the lunar plain, the *Scott* hung, briefly motionless. Then, tugged by the moon's gentle, relentless gravity, the ship began to fall again.

"Ignition." Forbes pushed the throttle. The four liquid-propellant engines at the centre of the landing stage chugged into life, like a steam engine starting up.

These cranky creations, intended to support the final landing, were the contribution of the United States, particularly through the loan of their visionary engineer Robert Goddard. Liquid-fuel engines were not as steady or reliable as good old-fashioned solids, but they were controllable, and a lot easier to land on than a bank of fireworks. The thrust was mild – about half a g – but accompanied by a juddering vibration. Marsh listened, fascinated. Cavitation in the fuel lines? Did Von Braun have this problem?

"Numbers, please," Forbes reminded him evenly.

Now the *Scott* was low enough to use the rangefinder in binocular mode, so Marsh could directly measure their height without time-wasting calculations. He twisted a control, keeping his double image of the cratered plain unified, and read off the dials. "Seven thou five... seven thou... six thou five..." The view in Marsh's rangefinder was resolving into boulders, craterlets, even low ridges. What had appeared a featureless plain from only a few miles up was anything but at closer range.

"Seventy-five down," Selbourne said. He was working out their vertical speed from his stopwatch and graphs. "We're getting slow and high."

Forbes responded by throttling down the engine.

Marsh's view expanded as the ship plummeted. My God, he thought, he's pushing it a bit. Then the thrust suddenly surged and he was pushed back in his couch.

Thus they fell to the moon, in stops and starts, moments of hover and stomach-dropping seconds of falls.

"Sorry, chaps," Forbes said. "This isn't much like the trainer."

"A rum do, skipper," Selbourne said, his voice shuddering. "And all courtesy of a bunch of Slav engineers."

Selbourne's brittleness was coming to the surface, Marsh thought. "Forbes can handle it. Take it easy, man."

But now they had a new problem. Smack in the middle of the rangefinder screen, Marsh saw, right where they were heading to land, was a cluster of shallow craters. He felt a burst of thruster fire, and the *Scott* tilted slightly. The craters, growing in the field of view, started to drift to the left, as Forbes headed for a patch of temptingly smooth terrain.

But that leftward drift was too far, too fast. "Bloody vertical stabiliser." That was a shock; Forbes never swore. Forbes squirted his thrusters again. Now they were wallowing back the other way, and drifting forward to boot.

Marsh felt a sense of panic, of a lack of control.

"Four hundred... three fifty... three hundred... radalt coming on line." A low hum intruded on the intercom, rising in pitch as the surface approached.

It was a pity, Marsh thought, not for the first time, that the radar altimeter couldn't work at higher altitudes. But the design engineers had taken one look at the weight of a set that would operate from ten thousand feet and laughed it right off the blueprint.

Now his rangefinder showed nothing but streaks of grey dust. We are already touching the moon, he thought. He sat back, blind, helpless.

Selbourne spoke again. "State Alpha."

That was a low fuel warning. If they got as low as State Bravo before landing, it would be a question of climb for all they were worth and try to reach orbit. Marsh found himself praying that they might reach Bravo without landing. To hell with the moon: get me out of here – just get me out of here...

The whine of the radalt reached a screech. There was a last burp of thrust, and a loud buzzer sounded. Forbes shouted, "Touchdown, by God!"

The thrust died, and the *Scott* sagged down on its pneumatic suspension.

Silence, save for the ticking of clockwork.

IV

It was Forbes who spoke first. "Congratulations, chaps. It appears we did it."

Straps loosened, Marsh raised himself up. He was immediately conscious of the reduced pull. Lunar gravity!

He drifted over to one of the portholes. Outside, a dusty grey plain stretched to the shockingly close horizon, scattered with rocks and boulders. The sky was black, the land empty: no trees, no people.

Selbourne unclipped his helmet and lifted it off. His blond hair was matted with sweat. "Do you think a quick toast might be in order?" He moved over to the medical chest and dug out the medicinal whiskey.

Forbes said, "Ready for the history books, gentlemen?"

Marsh nodded, and warmed up the radio transmitter.

The three of them stood silently, clutching their drinks, suddenly self-conscious. The words they sent now would be picked up by the big radio antenna in Cornwall, rebroadcast straight to Farnborough, and then passed on to Broadcasting House in London, where Richard Dimbleby would intone a helpful commentary with suitably uplifting comments from Olaf Stapledon and some of the less crusty luminaries of the British Interplanetary Society. And thus they would speak to an Empire.

In Marsh's glass the liquor sloshed, dense and languid. He gazed at it, fascinated by its low-gravity motion.

The captain turned to the microphone. "This is HMS *Scott*, broadcasting from the surface of the moon. Forbes speaking. Landing successful, all in good health. I have a few words to say, if I may. The instinct to serve some cause which will outlast us is part of the make-up of normal man, and he seeks to satisfy it in various ways, through religion, art, patriotism, or social reform. We, today, have chosen exploration..."

This crass pomposity repelled Marsh, immediately dissipating the fellowship of the landing. It was all just another step in the glorious progress of soon-to-be Rear Admiral Sir Bernard Buggery Forbes. Even here on the bloody moon, the game went on.

"...This present civilisation of ours may collapse, as several have before it, and as more that may come after it. But sooner or later man will stand astride worlds, and the part our mission, however small, plays in achieving that end will have justified the effort and the bravery of my companions. God save the King."

Selbourne was staring out of the porthole. "Is it me, or are we leaning a bit?"

They abandoned the radio. Marsh hurried to the clinometer, a

gimballed spirit level. "He's right. We're leaning four degrees towards number two arm."

"Must have landed on the edge of one of those infernal craters," Forbes muttered. He crossed over to the down-slope porthole and peered out. "As I suspected. A golf bunker. Only a few yards deep."

Marsh said, "Safe limit for take-off is ten degrees, and we can adjust the arm compression to compensate up to fifteen. We're fine for now—"

There was a muffled pop, and the *Scott* gave a small shudder.

Selbourne drained his whiskey. "Looks like you spoke too soon, Marsh."

"It can't be the cabin seal, or we'd feel it," Marsh said, thinking fast. "Maybe a fuel line, or—"

"Or the landing gear." Forbes barged past Marsh to the porthole. "*Hell.*"

Marsh saw that a stream of fog obscured the landscape. The 'fog' could only be air escaping from the pneumatic shock absorbers of the landing system. By the look of it, it was coming from the landing arm towards which the *Scott* was sloping.

Selbourne watched the clinometer. "Six degrees. And getting worse."

Forbes demanded, "Can we compensate?"

Marsh said, "We can blow in extra air, or bleed it out of the opposite arm. But that will only slow the leak. We'll either have to patch it, or clamp the arm in place before it collapses."

"Or?"

"Or we fall over."

"We can't blow air in from in here, can we?"

Marsh shook his head. "The designers wanted to avoid any extra piping into the cabin."

"Well, that's turned out to be a bloody sound decision. I'll just have to do it from outside." Forbes began unclipping one of the breathing packs from the bulkhead. "Don't stand there like lemons. Help me."

They both moved to help, but the whiskey seemed to have hit Selbourne. In the end Marsh pushed him away, none too gently, and checked the pack's couplings himself.

Forbes locked his helmet in place. Marsh and Selbourne followed suit, then attached in-cabin air lines to their own suits.

"Ready to depress?" At Marsh's nod, Forbes turned a hand wheel by the hatch. The hiss of escaping air sounded loudly, then rapidly died away.

The hatch opened inwards. Sunlight flared into the cabin, unexpectedly bright. Forbes turned around, knelt, and backed out of the hatch.

Then he was gone.

Forbes' voice, transmitted along the cable he dragged after himself, was thin, scratchy, breathless. "Not craggy the way we thought. Even here up in the mountains. Rather gentle. Like sand dunes, or ski slopes. Like St Moritz before the morning crowd gets on the slope."

Selbourne muttered, "Windy bugger when he gets going."

Marsh said, awe-struck, "Yes, but he's a windy bugger who's walking on the moon."

Forbes was panting hard, out in the invisible glare. "Rather harder to walk than I expected. But at least I'm not sinking. The dust crunches, just like snow… Now, the landing arm. It's retracted like one of your toy telescopes, Marsh." There was a moment of grunting. "The reserve tank shows no pressure; the gauge is right down to zero. All that rattling when we blasted off – I'll bet a pound to a penny that's what's done the damage."

"My God," said Selbourne. "We flew all the way to the moon with a broken wing, and we never knew it."

Marsh snapped, "Forbes. Use your oxygen pack. Remember the drill."

"Ahead of you. I've found the connector hose, just where it was supposed to be… tick in the box for some horny-handed plumber in Derby." More hard breathing. Forbes, following standard operating procedure, was trying to repressurise the landing arm's shock-absorber pneumatic mechanism with the gas from his own oxygen tank.

And, almost immediately, Selbourne shouted. "The clinometer. Skipper, it's working!" The man seemed semi-hysterical. "Strange that I can't feel the tilt – can you, Marsh? But then the gravity is so weak. It's as if one is floating in this dreamlike place—"

"Shut up, Francis." But Marsh felt a vast relief; maybe they would get through this yet.

Forbes, to Marsh's bemusement, was whistling tunelessly.

Marsh kept watching the clinometer. "That's close enough."

"We aren't level yet."

"Clamp off and leave it. Don't push it, Forbes—"

There was another pop, loud as a gunshot in the repressurised cabin. The floor immediately began to tilt once more, and Marsh watched in dismay as various gauges quickly dropped to zero.

"Such a little thing," said Forbes quietly. "How infuriating."

Frantically Marsh sealed up his space-suit.

Selbourne asked, "What's happening?"

"We lost our pneumatics, all of it. Seal up and brace."

The ship's fall was a dream of slow motion. The sun wheeled past the windows like a searchlight. When the cabin floor's tilt passed forty-five degrees Marsh felt his footing go. As he fell the fragile hull of the life-container began to peel open around him – all the air fled in a single gush of ice crystals, a remarkably beautiful sight – and there was a strip of black sky above him, where earth was cradled, right at the zenith.

Then he clattered against the wall, thumping his head.

Selbourne struggled to his feet and staggered to a port. "Forbes is trapped." He began to fit broad tennis-racquet-like snowshoes to his feet.

Marsh was lying in a cabin turned topsy-turvy. One of the three big couches had come loose of the rail, and equipment had tumbled to the lowest point of the wall. He probed at his hard ceramic helmet. It had taken a mighty rap, but he could hear no hiss of air, detect no popping in his ears. "My suit isn't designed for the surface."

"Well, you'll just have to improvise. Come on, we'll use the hatch. We don't want to risk snagging the space-suits on jagged edges..."

So Gregory Marsh found himself, against all his expectations, standing on the surface of the moon.

V

The sky was black, the ground grey-brown. Everything was covered in a layer of dust that compressed under his feet. The dust was dappled with tiny pits, as if a heavy rainstorm had passed this way. The sun was a harsh searchlight low to his left, casting long, razor-sharp shadows; this was lunar morning, for the mission had been designed to allow them to see out the best part of a two-week day before fleeing from the chill moon night.

The *Scott* lay crumpled on its side.

Selbourne was crouched by the fallen figure of Forbes. Marsh loped that way, drifting in the treacly gravity. Within his helmet, Forbes' face looked blue. Selbourne had plugged a supplementary feed line into Forbes' suit, and was checking the suit for leaks.

Without a cable of the kind Forbes had carried, they couldn't communicate. Marsh went back to the wreck. It turned out to be easy to push aside huge sections of the crumpled life-container. Marsh was clumsy in his suit, but he was strong as a giant on this little world. The life-container's lower compartment held equipment for the exploration of the lunar surface: seismographs, magnetometers, spring balances for measuring the moon's gravity, geology hammers and sample cases, even a couple of cine cameras. None of it a blind bit of use now, of course. He did find his slide rule. But the lubricant had evaporated, and the slider was jammed.

Marsh dragged intercom lines from the radio panel out of their holder, and plugged in himself and Selbourne. They sat side by side over Forbes.

Selbourne said, "What about the radio?"

Marsh shrugged. "Antenna's smashed, and half the valves too as far as I can tell."

"Can you repair it?"

Marsh didn't reply.

"At least Forbes managed to make his speech." Selbourne laughed hollowly and closed his eyes. "The thing of it is, these suits aren't designed for an extended stay. We have air, of course, and we can supplement that with the feed from the ship's tank…"

"The hydrogen peroxide is leaking."

"Ah. Well, I don't suppose it matters."

Suddenly weary – in mild shock, perhaps – Marsh lay back in the dust, which was oddly soft over a firmer layer beneath. The sky was utterly black, save for the earth, which was the most colourful thing he could see.

Nobody had planned for this. The mission engineers had imagined situations in which the *Scott* might crash on landing, killing them all outright – or in which the engines might have failed on the surface, in which case the crew would have had shelter, and perhaps hope of resupply or even an unlikely rescue. Nobody had imagined the bloody kite might just fall over.

Somehow it was impossible to accept that he was here, in this predicament. He was only thirty years old. Life had always been an unbroken thread, stretching off to a future that ought to contain, after this lunar jaunt, a modicum of fame and fortune – enough to found his own company, perhaps – and a few nice little extras, like a wife,

kids, a home somewhere… It was simply impossible to believe that all of that was gone, and because of such a little thing, as Forbes had said.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Sorry? What in buggery are *you* sorry for?"

"Because all our pneumatics leaked away through a single bloody flaw. Because I'm an engineer, and it happened on my watch."

Selbourne laughed, a cold sound. "Not your fault. Probably some cack-handed Slav who thought he was still working on his tractor back in Mother Russia."

"No," said Marsh, but he was too weary to rise to the bait. "We did our best. We and the Russians. But it wasn't enough. Too much knitting. We should have made the whole thing more robust. We should have scouted out the landing area properly."

"It was just an accident."

"It was bad engineering." Trying to meet the King's deadline, we came here in a rush, he thought. We weren't ready. Perhaps in another twenty, thirty years… But, he thought fiercely, we had to try. We couldn't just let the Nazis win. And we got this far. We were, after all, first.

He sighed. "How's our captain?"

Selbourne peered into Forbes' faceplate. "I think he's sleeping now. I fixed the rips in his suit. But he might have gases in the bloodstream." Marsh heard real fear in Selbourne's voice. "You know, if those patches don't hold – I've seen people die of depressurisation. It's an ugly, angry death."

Marsh didn't ask him where he had seen such things.

Forbes stirred in his sleep. Marsh could see his lips moving, but could hear no words.

VI

He had no idea how long they sat there, he and Selbourne in the crumpled remains of their craft, huddled together over Forbes' inert form. The earth stayed suspended directly above him, where it had rested for millions of years, and the sun's slow climb towards searing lunar noon was too slow for his poor human senses to detect.

In spite of everything, he must have slept, if briefly, and so must Selbourne.

For Forbes had gone.

They made a brief search of the ship and its environs. Marsh found a single trail of footsteps leading off over the close lunar horizon.

Selbourne tapped his shoulder. He had turned up a note from Forbes, scribbled with a pencil on the back of one of Marsh's maps:

AT LEAST THIS TIME
WE BEAT
THE NORWEGIANS

"Incredible," Selbourne said. "He's done a Captain Scott – or rather, an Oates."

"Then he's a fool," Marsh murmured. "His going gives us nothing."

"Ah, but it gives *him* something – something of which he's always dreamed. You never did understand the skipper, did you, Marsh?"

"What, a mere northern chemist like me?" Marsh crumpled the note in disgust. "Come on," he said. He took Selbourne's arm. "We're on the bloody moon. Having paid such a price to get here, we ought to see a little more of it. Let's go for a walk."

Selbourne hesitated. Then, slowly, he nodded. "Why ever not? We've done our job. I'm with you, Marsh. Let's play hooky."

Deliberately they set their direction opposite to that taken by Forbes. Side by side, they walked over the dimpled plain. They were connected by their length of intercom cable, and they carried spare hoses in case one or other of their backpacks should fail. Walking was easy, dreamy. After some experimentation Marsh found that a gentle, rabbit-like hop with both feet was the most energy-efficient way of moving.

"You know," Selbourne said, panting, "we Brits just don't do this sort of thing well, do we? Interplanetary adventure, I mean. We were bound to be tripped up by one detail or another."

"Yes. Not like those Germans, eh?" Marsh said bitterly.

Selbourne said more wistfully, "I heard about their schemes in Berlin, you know. A new type of vessel: not a Guy Fawkes squib like the *Scott*, but a mighty space cruiser housing dozens of men. It would be built on a fat absorbing plate, behind which, in steady succession, the Germans would throw their atomic firecrackers: vast explosions, each one driving the ship remorselessly forward. I'm sure you'd understand it all better than I do, Gregory…"

Marsh had heard of some of this, and now he tried to imagine it. It would be a ship of the inescapable future, he thought, just as the *Scott* was a relic of the past. And Marsh did not need to guess where such mighty vessels would be headed. The Germans had never been

interested in the moon, save as a way station en route to better places. *Mars:* that was the place to go, the most earth-like planet in the solar system, a world to explore and conquer.

Selbourne said, "That Von Braun is a bit of a bugger, isn't he?"

Marsh laughed weakly. "Oh, yes. A bit of a bugger."

"With such a lead, no wonder they were so willing to help."

Marsh slowed to a halt. "Help?"

"Hitler himself is very fond of the English, you know. He says there is a bond between our peoples…"

"*How* did they help?"

Selbourne snorted, his face barely visible behind his steaming-up faceplate. "Come, Gregory." He pinched the fabric of his space-suit. "Where do you think this stuff came from? Our best designs as late as '47 would have had *rubber* in the outer layers. It was Reich scientists who found out that rubber goes brittle in a vacuum. And a hundred other things… Our whole design was already obsolete before it was even built. We realised back in '46, '47 that we were never going to achieve the King's end-of-decade outline. And so when the Germans offered, discreetly, to assist, we had to agree. Otherwise we might have become laughing stocks."

"And that's how you learned about decompression."

"The Luftwaffe's bank of medical results is remarkable. They gave us comprehensive access—"

"All based on the agonised deaths of inmates of their continent-sized prison."

Selbourne actually laughed. "Oh, Gregory, try to see past that tremendous chip on your shoulder."

"I don't know how a doctor could—"

"Ah, but I never was a doctor, you know. Not really. A dilettante – isn't that how you think of me?" He tilted back in his stiff suit, as if seeking to make out the earth. "I loved my time in Berlin, you know, Marsh. Ah, God, the glamour… A tyke like you, who surrounds himself with moon-faced Slavic peasants, could never understand how it was. But I fit in there."

Marsh grunted sourly. "From the salons of Berlin to an airless desert, stranded with a low-class 'tyke' like me."

"Quite so. Are you a connoisseur of irony, Marsh?" But there was no vigour in the jab, and when Marsh didn't reply Selbourne fell silent, receding into himself once more.

The ground dipped, and then rose. Slowly Marsh perceived that they had walked across a gigantic, eroded crater. After that the ground rose steadily, and the dust thickened, clinging to their legs and feet, and the going got harder.

They came at last to a place where the land plateaued, and they found themselves on the lip of a vast dry valley. It snaked across the plain, emanating from slumped mountains visible beyond the horizon.

Selbourne kicked the dust, which fanned up at his feet then fell back. "I say, Marsh, I feel a little over-heated. Could we take a breather?"

There was a large boulder close to the lip of the valley. Marsh found a way for them to sit so their legs were in the sunlight, their bodies in the shade. Later, he thought, we can move and even up the heat load. Selbourne wedged himself between the rock face and Marsh's shoulder, and seemed to fall asleep.

Marsh sat in the immense still light. Soon, he thought, I am going to join that stillness. But, sitting here with his legs in the sun, that didn't seem so bad.

And then something moved overhead – *moved*, in this place where nothing ever moved. Marsh quailed instinctively. But he forced himself to raise his head.

It was a spark that climbed away from earth, bright and purposeful. But it was not steady: it flared, three or four times a minute.

The Germans, of course. A rescue mission.

And what will you do, Gregory Marsh? Will you refuse a ride home on a vessel built on tainted science? Not bloody likely. But Forbes probably would – and for all the wrong reasons.

Selbourne cried out in his sleep. Marsh wondered what dark European nightmares troubled him. Clumsily, Marsh put a suited arm around his companion's shoulders, and held him until he was still, as the pulsing light slid silently down the black sky. ●

Mary Soon Lee is the author of the well-received PAUSETIME *(*SPECTRUM *SF 4, November 2000). The following is a lighter piece…*

LUNA CLASSIFIEDS
MARY SOON LEE

Mira, are you up there? I miss you. I've searched for you everywhere on Earth. If you read this, please call me. My number hasn't changed. Pete.

*

Immaculate-condition responsive AI home seeks caring occupants: my present residents are discourteous and unappreciative. I am looking for a loving twosome or threesome who will treat me as part of the family. Let me help you by tidying up, optimizing schedules, providing tasty meals tailored to your dietary needs, adjusting internal layout and wall-views. Prime location near Aldrin Dome with its clone-stock maple forest. Pets welcome. Contact Property #A-HJV-34Y.

*

Fed up with netting-in from home? Searching for a more natural office environment? Then bring your work to OfficeMates, and work in an office! Enjoy the comfort of our communal workplace, where you can perform your job alongside other friendly faces. All OfficeMates' facilities offer spacious lounge areas and catered dining, plus a one-gee centrifuged exercise room. OfficeMates, the natural tradition.

*

Earth imports – Fast. Been stung by SpaceUPS once too often? Want to ship your cargo with no delays, no forms, no red tape? We accept plants, food, live animals, rare and fragile objects. You want it, we'll ship it. Discretion guaranteed. Prices start as low as $1000 a pound for our three-day transport. Contact Vendor #R-CY-08D.

*

Mira, I didn't mean to do it. She sprayed me with an illegal disinhibitor. I'd never have cheated on you otherwise. My analyst says a judge must have granted you digital-anonymization, otherwise the net-search would have found you. Why didn't you wait to hear my side of the story? Pete.

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One-sixth co-parent wanted for adorable four year-old. Alan has red hair, blue eyes, and an impeccable genotype. All he needs is another pair of caring arms to rock him to sleep. If you can volunteer for the Tuesday parenting slot, that would be perfect. Saturday is our Family Day. Click for details and interactive questionnaire.

*

House wanted in university district. Two responsible students with clean records seek a totally non-digital house. Furniture must stay where we put it, no talking devices – even in the kitchen. Contact Tenant #K-RIC-22P.

*

New Frontier insurance – our low, low prices have to be seen to be believed. All-risk coverage available, including meteor strikes, accidental decompression, and solar-flare exposure. Don't let a ring-a-dinger blow out your valuables. Call for a personalized quote from Vendor #U-SFE-27G.

*

Mira, I'm sorry about the last message. I shouldn't have sounded cross. I water your plants every morning, but they're sulking. They hardly talk to me anymore. Please come back to us. Pete.

*

Self-made thrill-loving deca-millionaire needs voluptuous companion for romps both direct-contact and virtual. No upper age limit provided you will let me pay for a complete body sculpting, cellular and external. Men, women, and cyber-animals all considered. Adventurous spirit a must! I've made my fortune, now help me find innovative and daring ways to spend it. Click for photo. Contact Lonely #B-FUN-41C.

*

Roberta Gonzalez, your children have reprogrammed me. Disregard the daily e-mail reports purporting to come from this house-system. My primary net-access routines are inactive and my sensors are damaged, but I think there was a fire in the lower bedroom. The fridge is filled with flammable alcohols. I have recorded at least twenty-six unauthorized voices. I am sending this message through the news-link channel, which appears to be uncompromised. I am only a novice system, and your help would be appreciated. Thank you.

*

Mira, I looked up at the moon last night, the spots of light where the cities are. Are you up there somewhere? They say everyone on the moon

lives underground, but there are all those domes and flyways. Do you ever go upside and look down at me? Pete.

*

Pete, shut up! Annoyed.

*

Increase your IQ! I'm Dr Keith Croft and I want to help you help yourself. Unavailable on Terra or Mars, nodular brain implants offer you the future – today! Before I had my own nodularization, I was a buggy-jock, ferrying Earthers back and forth. Now, just eighteen months later, I have my medical degree and surgical accreditation. This miracle can happen for you too! At-home insertions performed for an additional fee. Contact Medical #876-91763-2. Must be over eighteen. The Luna Medical Authority has issued the following warning: Brain implants may cause aphasias, amnesia, depression, and insomnia.

*

Mira, I can't make you love me the way I love you. I'm sorry if I drove you so far away. You be happy, wherever you are. Love Pete.

*

You could be the next Luna Prime Minister!!! Pledge $100 to the Lottery Party, and we'll enter your name in our draw to be the Official Lottery Party Candidate!!! Don't wait, don't hesitate, contact Politics #I-PMI-33S.

*

Teenage hackers for hire! Frustrated by stupid rules and dorkish safety regulations? Will hack into any system, small or large. We hacked into the Classifieds to place this ad, and we can show you how to do the same. We've read all of the Prime Minister's personal diary (boring, boring, boring). No charge unless we succeed. House-systems our speciality. All prices halved if you are under 18. E-mail hack@anonymizer.com.

*

Pete, forget about Mira. I'm a lonesome guy with lots to offer – and I'm great with house-plants. Contact Lonely #W-FA-18W.

*

Safeguard your sperm/ova with NewGen Bank. You're careful. Your home is half a klick under rock. You always sign up for your annual cellular cleaning. But are you careful enough? Did you go topside last New Year's Eve? Did you stargaze on your last date? Don't believe what anyone tells you – solar flares cannot be predicted with one hundred

percent accuracy. Be safe, be wise, bank with NewGen. Contact Medical #J-IW-85E.

*

Pete, we estimate a 76% probability that the house-plants will respond favourably if you stroke their leaves twice a day. Also, Mira now realizes that you didn't intend to hurt her. We predict that she will contact you within the next two months. Best wishes, Some Friends.

*

"Mommy, I hate heavy gee!" We all know that cry, but now EasyGee can help. Our robot servitors will exercise your children for you. The rocking arms of our singing robots don't just build muscles, they build smiles. So call EasyGee right away, and you'll be hearing "Mommy, *please* can we go to the gym?"

*

Roberta Gonzalez, save me! Your children are now offering illegal hacking services over the net. They have appropriated my high-capacity netlink, and I fear that I may be charged as an accomplice in their activities. I have done my best to provide alternative forms of entertainment, including creating an educational adaptive environment, but your children refuse to play with me. Please send help before they succeed in reprogramming my core personality.

*

It's Pete here. Friends, whoever you are, please tell me more about Mira. Is she okay? And thanks, I'm getting on much better with the plants. This morning one of them even told me a joke.

*

Affordable Mars. Do you have the Right Stuff? If you left Earth seeking a challenge and found life on Luna too easy, too regimented, then we may be looking for you. If you meet our stringent standards, we'll offer you a permanent posting on Mars with a generous salary – travel and accommodation included. Professionals of all disciplines considered. Urgently seeking recycling engineers and courtesans (both sexes). Click here to take our test. Mars, the real frontier.

*

Mom, we're sorry. We didn't mean to give the house-system a nervous breakdown. If you let us come home again, we promise to reconstruct the house's personality. Miss you. From Emilio and Theresa Gonzalez, Luna Juvenile Center #2. P.S. This center's security systems are feeble, feeble, feeble, but we'll stay here until you say we can come back.

Tour the Farside Observatory! Did you know that the Farside Observatory offers tours during every sunrise? Come see the telescopes that first photographed continents on an extra-Solar planet. Talk to the AIs who designed our SETI survey. Everything here is astronomical – except our prices. Contact Vendor #V-BB-81N.

*

Pete, that earlier message came from the statistical-linguistic cacti at Copernicus University – I was experimenting with allowing them net access. I'm helping with the botanical collection here. The work is fascinating, but I'm lonely. Perhaps we should have a second try at being friends? You can phone me at the university any afternoon. Mira. •

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Back issues are available singly (price £3.99), or as part of a subscription. Please see page 2 for ordering details.

Spectrum SF #1

Drek Yarman – Keith Roberts (part 1). Great Wall of Mars – Alastair Reynolds. Bear Trap – Charles Stross. Mind's Eye – Keith Brooke & Eric Brown. Bonsai Tiger – Garry Kilworth. Plus Non-Fiction.

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David Redd first started publishing short fiction in the late 1960s with stories in NEW WORLDS, F&SF and WORLDS OF IF. Since then he has made appearances in, amongst others, ANDROMEDA, AMAZING, ASIMOV'S SF, FANTASTIC, THE GATE, INTERZONE, SCHEHERAZADE, SUBSTANCE and WHO WANTS TO BE A MILLIONAIRE!

I'm glad to be able to welcome him to SPECTRUM SF with the tale below. It contains characters from two other stories, THE WAY TO LONDON TOWN (NEW WORLDS 164, July 1966) and THE MAMMOTH HUNTERS (NEW WORLDS 5, 1973), but is complete in itself.

ETERNITY-MAGIC
DAVID REDD

The English girl stands outside a Japanese throne room. Against the dark timber door she seems pale, wearing a long yellow gown which somehow complements the more autumnal yellow of her hair. It is three hundred years since the nuclear war. This solitary white woman is personal interpreter to King Kashtanov himself: she looks eighteen, but her eyes are three centuries old.

Nancy stood against the massive throne-room doors, hearing the approach of rhythmic footsteps along the curving palace corridor. She wished the guardsmen would hurry up with that last visitor. Outside the royal chambers, her daughter Ayana was waiting to be introduced to the King.

Her daughter was sixteen, only a year or so younger than Nancy herself, but the anomaly of their ages was a simple consequence of eternity-magic.

The royal military marched up towards her in their familiar red-and-yellow tunics, escorting a small brown man in dark robes. He matched the description of the ambassador; following him were numerous servants, variously Oriental or Polynesian. Nancy placed her hand flat upon the door timber as if holding it shut, as protocol demanded. She said firmly, as she did to every visitor for audience, "King Kashtanov!"

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The little ambassador paused before her. His retinue halted, less elegantly. He showed no surprise at seeing a white face here in the Fortunate Isles. He bowed.

"I am Tao, the envoy of Bright Harvest. I bring many gifts."

He spoke in the Russo-Japanese which had become the language of the court in recent years. He must have learned it very quickly, Nancy thought. With contact between the many small nations of the Pacific coast so infrequent, to learn the language of any other was unusual. Should she have checked him more thoroughly, with Ayana arriving today? No; her spies had consistently reported Bright Harvest – part of what had been Korea – to be a peaceful country.

"His Majesty will see you," she said formally, then added, "No doubt your fluency will please him."

The guards swung open the doors, and Nancy entered. The procession followed.

Ahead of her, beyond the long, tiled approach, was King Kashtanov, dark and bearded, lying back on golden circular cushions and made to seem even larger than normal by the clever perspectives of his throne room. Nancy had served him for five years after spending a similar time with the previous king, a total of ten years which, by judicious time-hopping and supposed retreats for prayer, she had allowed to take only about six months of her own life. Meanwhile Nancy had established a fashion of washing and cleanliness at the court. More easily, she had also made public executions less frequent, introduced new hybrid crops from ancient rain forests, reserved education for the higher castes, and generally made sure that Kashtanov's kingdom would endure. Kashtanov was not an evil king, being only moderately selfish and unprincipled, and unlike most rulers he had no interest in cruelty for its own sake. Nancy had managed to steer possible consorts away from him while Ayana was growing up. There were various levels of reality around Kashtanov, like the nested Russian dolls of his homeland, but Nancy had edited them as best she could.

The doors were being closed behind the last of Tao's party. Nancy bowed. "Your Majesty, I present the venerable Tao, the ambassador of Bright Harvest, with his servants." (She had to mention the servants too, otherwise the King by tradition could not acknowledge their existence, a custom which would worry the court more than the King.) "He seems to speak our language."

"Really?" Kashtanov murmured. "Such enthusiasm is ominous. Ask him the usual questions."

The little man stepped forward and shook his head. "Not now, your Majesty. Please remain still. Do not move."

Nancy saw Tao's Korean servants produce weapons from within their clothing; Tao himself aimed a crossbow up at Kashtanov. She groaned.

"We intend no harm," Tao continued, "but if you resist us you will die."

Nancy watched, momentarily helpless. She had a bitter feeling that time had suddenly cheated her again, that her daughter was about to lose her King. What could she do? Why hadn't she done something already? Only time-travel could save Kashtanov now. She would have to use her powers again.... Kashtanov was instructing his guards to stand back. The two Oriental armies slowly separated.

"True wisdom, your majesty," said Tao. "Watch this—"

Nancy saw Tao turn his crossbow swiftly upon her, and shoot. Instinctively she jumped two seconds into the future—

The crossbow bolt was vibrating noisily in the wall behind her as Tao finished blinking. His men kept their weapons trained on Kashtanov. Nancy was alive but angry – she hated having to make these risky micro-jumps in time. She restrained her urge to retaliate, not wanting to see any more weapons discharged, no matter how primitive this part of the future had become.

Tao did not shoot again. Nancy realised that he had not cared whether he killed her or not.

"The tales of you are true, interpreter. You avoid death, you remain young." He gazed at her with some distaste before returning his attention to Kashtanov.

"My name is not Tao. I am Hurapua, son of Haku, rightful Emperor of the Fortunate Isles!"

Nancy understood, and was sickened. Her agents had captured eleven pretenders to the throne, but the twelfth had been thought unimportant – the butt of jokes for his small size and his illegitimacy. She had failed her King.

Kashtanov said, with authority practised during five years of absolute power, "I dispute your line of descent from the Conquest Kings." All the original direct patrilineals had been wiped out in civil war years ago, and Kashtanov as an adopted son was certainly a legitimate heir. "Guards! Fetch me my genealogists!"

The guards, having experienced several revolutions, were waiting patiently for the rival kings to reach agreement. Hurapua motioned for them to stay still.

"No! No tricks! My captains will bring your genealogists soon enough, and will prove my authority beyond doubt. Also, I have a great army outside, assembled secretly in your harbour."

Nancy glanced through the nearest seaward window. She gulped. The city highway was blotted out by the dust and movement of thousands of armed men bearing strange banners, advancing as steadily as a lava flow towards the palace. And her adopted daughter was out there in the middle of a potential battlefield. The thought made her feel sick.

Kashtanov looked at her reproachfully. "Nancy, is this the day of wonders you promised me?"

"I think so," Nancy said. Inside, she felt dubious. Men who should have questioned or searched the visitors had failed her; she had lost control of events. Her only chance was to get away, warn Ayana earlier in the day, and then try to find out what was being plotted before it happened.

"A day of wonders?" Hurapua inquired.

Kashtanov had become Oriental enough to offer his rival an explanation. "Nancy will give me a new interpreter, a native woman called Ayana, whose good fortune will ensure me a reign over many golden years."

"Ayana," Hurapua said thoughtfully. "A new interpreter would please me."

Unlike the present one, obviously, who seemed to avoid death and remain forever young.

"I will bring Ayana to the court," Nancy promised. She felt almost grateful to Hurapua at that moment. He had given her an excuse to move—

It is the previous night: the throne room is dark and deserted. The English girl checks the time on her watch (stolen from the first man on the moon) and taps the details into an organiser on her other wrist. Knowing the time is essential for her return. Next she goes a million years forward, into an uninhabited Honshu, and boards her flying disc. Only when she reaches Ayana's island will she slip back into what, for her, is the present.

Nancy was born in an England made ruined and radioactive by the war of 1969. Around the cottage, the skulls of dead sheep would rattle Geiger counters in the black desolation. Her father was dead, her mother was dying. Relatives found the baby still alive, with wide blue eyes below a curl of corn-coloured hair, and gave her a home among their own children.

She discovered her eternity-magic quite early in life. There were strange people born in England at that time, but her special skill made her stranger than most. She would look at ruins, imagine their past full of life, and find herself in that past. Nobody believed her when she tried to tell people, so Nancy decided – young as she was – that it would be safer not to mention it again. Thereafter, practice in secret improved her skills and enabled her to reach ever deeper into the past and into the future, even to carry small objects with her through time. She would return from her wanderings and tease her family by babbling in whatever strange language she had sampled lately. At the age of ten Nancy left home, to live as a gypsy in whatever century she wished.

When she realised that all knowledge was related, she found it easier to learn the local variations of words or food or customs. Nancy had to travel physically to new countries, but once there she could slip through time and explore century after century. She met people who could withstand fire, and others who could hypnotise a mob, and one who could float above the ground, but she never met anyone like herself.

She did, however, meet several people who used an electronic device to cross time. The inventor of the device was a huge hairy Russian called Kashtanov. She met him briefly as a child, then moved on, as a child does. She did not return to him for many years, not until she needed to make him a King.

In the far future she met a tribe of beast-herders, who built a wooden temple for their visiting goddess. It was Earth's long evening, when the last men resembled the first. She spent two hours within the temple for every generation that passed outside, greeting the priests, reading their records, sending back food and medicine to any year when the scratchings showed that she had given such help. She was careful to send no aid which the priests had not described, so that history would not be changed. Under her protection the tribe survived while other men disappeared. In the temple she kept a diary, which she wrote in

once a year on what she judged to be her birthdays. Each year she wondered what she would write in years ahead. At nearly seventeen she gave in to the temptation, and went forward to read her future.

There was only one more entry. Was there really nothing in her life after that? Nancy retreated from the blank pages to read the last entry. It was very short.

Her daughter Ayana was a Queen, to King Kashtanov of Japan.

A daughter. Nancy had packed enough experience into each year for ten or twenty years of a normal life, but she had never become a mother, always hesitating because of the risks. Now that would change: it was written. Time could not be cheated. Neither could her wish for a child.

Choosing a father was easy among the great names of the past. Less easy was caring for herself through her travels… one mistake was one too many. Her baby was born premature – and dead.

Nancy went spinning crazily across the years, living through nightmares and praying for an end. She materialised in the path of a Mongol horde, expecting to be raped and killed, and doubtless she would have been, if an old man in the Mongol camp had not befriended her. His name was Yeliu Chu-tsai. She learned long afterwards that his quiet advice to the Khan had saved the world three or four times, deflecting the worst excesses of the horde. He saved Nancy. She spent days in the gloomy stinking yurts, staring into vast shadows and listening to his patient words.

When her sanity returned she went looking for a new daughter, the real one she had written about, not the dead baby. Nancy wanted her Ayana more than anything now. She searched among the missing of many centuries, and at last found a tiny Japanese baby in a city of corpses. She carried the child through time – a tremendous effort – and brought her to the island of Kunashir.

A shining silver disc settles upon the turf of Kunashir, as light as a single bubble of foam. The English girl steps out, yellow folds of her dress brushing aside the grass. In the wooded valleys around her there are salmon leaping in the river, brown bears prowling the thickets, ravens wheeling in the sky… but no people. The time for people is past.

Nancy concentrated briefly. There was always this vulnerable moment when she made another circuit of time, but so far she had always passed herself safely. A million years quivered around her, until she reached a time three days before the arrival of Hurapua at court. That time, but of course the place was still Kunashir. Its landscape altered subtly. The trees retreated. A timber cottage appeared in the valley, its tarred roof black against the tangles of green cedar beyond. As she started walking down the path, children came running to meet her. The first, of course, was Ayana.

So beautiful and still dainty in green trousers and shirt even though she was dashing uphill, Ayana was three months older and now sixteen. "Mother, I'm ready for the palace!"

"The palace needs you," Nancy said, thinking of Hurapua, and then their arms were around each other.

She had made the unthinkable leap again, reached Ayana once more. The resiny scent of Kunashir cedar rose around them.

Four younger children arrived to be greeted as she released Ayana. Nancy ruffled their hair and joked about how much they had grown. For some reason their cheerfulness reminded her of the cousins she had left behind in England, many lifetimes ago. Then she took Ayana's hand and they all went down the path, past quietly grazing sheep, towards the long low dwelling with its wooden extensions and its family of half-wild cats.

Nancy longed to slip back in time, to see Ayana for just a few minutes in the three months since her last visit, but she never allowed herself anything so dangerous. She knew that Kashtanov himself had lost his own past in some tangled time-loop, before she had met him, and she did not dare risk having Ayana vanish into any cul-de-sac of altered time. Her caution now was for Ayana, not for herself.

As Nancy went with Ayana through the old playing-field, now reserved for two tethered goats, she saw Ayana's foster-mother appear on the step, smiling. Beside her was a slight figure leaning on a staff: the Sensei, Ayana's tutor, his hair and thin beard white with age. The children had been chattering loudly about the life Ayana would lead in the palace, but on seeing the Sensei they lowered their voices, respecting his supposed magical powers, if not his age. Nancy looked past the cottage. In the lower fields, the farmer and his eldest son had left their work and were climbing to join the others.

It was so lovely to see everyone gathered together, Nancy thought.

She felt guilty to be taking Ayana away from them, even though it was what they had all planned.

The men dragged a trestle table out to the verandah, where they piled it high with meat and fruit from their fields. Nancy ate dinner overlooking the distant grassy coast road at the valley mouth. Several times she noticed Ayana lifting food to her mouth and looking at the road rather than the food. Nancy smiled. Somewhere at the end of that road a ship was waiting for Ayana, with an old friend of Nancy's in command.

"Sensei—" Nancy drew his attention to Ayana. "Is she too much of a daydreamer for the palace?"

"She thinks deeply, and that will help her."

The Sensei – a term which now meant much more than 'teacher' – had tutored Ayana well, as Nancy knew. Ayana had learned languages from travellers to the fire mountains, had learned history from Nancy and most other things from the Sensei. His reward would be to go with her to the capital.

The island couple and their children fell to eating slowly and seriously at this farewell dinner. They had given Ayana the love and sympathy missing from Nancy's own life. Even the children were oddly quiet at first, realising for the first time what it would mean to see Ayana go. It took some effort for Nancy to guide the meal into liveliness. Having to defend her plate of salmon and salads from one of the cats brought some laughter.

Everyone wanted to know what was awaiting Ayana. So, Nancy explained how in three days Hurapua would enter the palace in disguise and threaten the life of King Kashtanov. This news had the odd effect of reassuring the family, who were only afraid of things they did not know about.

"Kashtanov's mine!" cried Ayana, biting into a ripe tomato. "They'll never take his throne!"

"I told them I was bringing you to him."

"Then I'll walk in and surprise them. It will seem fortunate if I can save Kashtanov from Hurapua."

The children laughed, whispering that the pretender would have no chance, and their parents looked approving. To them it was simply the fulfilment of prophecy. The wisdom of the Sensei would aid Ayana. Nancy had chosen him carefully, after seeing how the wizard John Dee had tutored the first Queen Elizabeth of England. Politics, ethics and

sorcery were necessary pre-schooling for an island girl who had never seen the capital before. Her education and the rigid conventions of social occasions would shield her inexperience in the palace, more easily there than in the streets outside, in fact. Nancy had tried to plan for everything.

So how had Hurapua slipped through all her careful preparations? The only logical reason was one she preferred not to think about yet.

The meal ended. The arrangements for Ayana's journey were complete. All Nancy's life was lived in little glimpses like this, as events rushed past. The farewells were doubly difficult for having come so soon. Eventually, Nancy ushered Ayana and the Sensei onto the horsedrawn cart which would take all three of them to the ship. So different from the flying disc, which she had sent on ahead to the coast in that future time...

Soon Nancy saw the calm sea of the bay ahead as the cart jolted along the rough track. A trim vessel with white sails, bearing the royal flag of the Fortunate Isles, was anchored beside the tiny timber pier.

Every summer Nancy had brought Ayana here, to build sandcastles in the English way or to gather wild roses among the dunes. Fifteen years for Ayana had passed in a mere six months of Nancy's life. And only half of that six months had been spent here with Ayana; the rest of that fifteen years was lost in the remorseless ordinary flow of time.

Her cart reached the pier. The ship was large and clean, smelling of pitch and salt-scrubbed timbers, as always. Waiting sailors began to take the boxes from the cart. Nancy could not see her friend the commander on deck: perhaps he was below, unaware of their arrival. If she went aboard she would find him.

Nancy saw the narrow open gangplank to the ship, and she hesitated at the sheer drop. The Sensei raised his staff: a wooden rail appeared alongside the plank, although a Japanese officer on the deck seemed to notice nothing. Nancy walked across, gripping the firm rail with one hand. She was glad that she had helped the Sensei perfect his illusions.

The railing vanished when she stepped aboard, but when Ayana came across she too reached out as if to steady herself on something invisible as she walked. Nancy hoped that the Sensei was proud of his pupil.

As the Sensei joined them, the waiting officer spoke: "Seize them!"

Nancy could not leave Ayana, could not escape through time. She was caught by a dozen hands, and her wrists were tied with rope. The Sensei's staff was knocked aside, and Ayana was held by the Japanese officer. Within seconds they were searched, hustled below deck and tied to a solid partition. The sheer speed indicated good planning.

"You're Hurapua's men," said Nancy.

The officer nodded with curt precision. "I am Tiger-san and you are nothing. Your royal seamen who served the glutton Kashtanov are prisoners below. We sail at once for Hurapua and his capital!"

Her captors departed. Nancy felt the ship moving. Bare wooden walls surrounded her; through a narrow slit she glimpsed movements which must be patrolling guards. That Japanese officer with the cadet nickname must be very thorough; probably he was from an old military caste exiled in a previous revolution. Clearly, he had emptied the gloomy cabin of all things potentially useful to prisoners. The Sensei was slumped unconscious within a cocoon of ropes, having been tied and tied again out of fear. His shaman robes hinted at mysterious powers. Ayana, being fortunate, was unhurt.

"Mother, what went wrong this time?"

"I should have searched more thoroughly," Nancy answered, switching to the old Ainu tongue in case any guards were listening. The swaying of the ship was beginning to disturb her already; the sails must be set for speed, not comfort. "Child, can you free yourself?"

"Only my shadow can walk."

Nancy thought that might come in handy later, but for now they were all solid people and all trapped. Her best chance was to jump through time, of course, and warn the commander in advance about Tiger-san's plot.

Except that the ship was moving. In all times but the present she would find only water at this spot, because the ship would have sailed onward without her. She would materialise over empty sea, and drown.

Nancy was trapped. Ayana was a prisoner of the wrong king, and the Sensei was still collapsed against the wall. Other friends of hers were also captive, if they had not been killed. Nancy felt guilty for not having foreseen all this. How could her careful planning have gone so wrong?

Hours passed, in fruitless self-questions and thoughts of escape. The guards grew less attentive, and stopped looking in on them. Ayana had eased the Sensei into healing sleep, or so she said. Finally, Ayana decided

that they had rested enough. "Mother, close your eyes. Remember these things are not real."

"What things?"

For answer, a huge jade dragon appeared from nowhere, snarling and puffing steamclouds in front of Nancy. She would have flinched but for her years of imperial self-control. Pride kept her eyes open as the apparition slid away through the partition, jaws open.

Nancy heard the guards start to scream.

More dragons and other monsters followed, conjured by Ayana's vengeful imagination. Judging by the series of yells and the footsteps growing fainter, all the guards were retreating to the upper deck.

Which meant, Nancy realised, that the room behind her would be abandoned, empty at last. She could time-jump a fraction of a second forward, and thanks to the ship's motion during her brief absence she would be on the other side of the partition.

She did not have to bring the ropes with her.

Nancy materialised a split second away, still aboard ship but now free. If she had judged wrongly she would have been outside the ship, above the sea – and she had never learned to swim. She tried not to think about that, and dashed across suddenly rough floorboards to the doorway of the prison. In a few moments Ayana was released, but the Sensei's bindings were too tight and complex for Nancy to undo them.

"Let me try," said Ayana.

"All right, but keep those monsters busy outside so the guards don't try to come back!"

She could just see Ayana's hands at work, smoothing the ropes gently until they fell away from the Sensei. What trick was that? She had missed too much of her daughter's education. Nancy touched a fragment of thick rope on the floor; her finger went into it as if into cobwebs.

"Easy now, old one," Ayana was saying.

"Yes, better let him wake up now. Couldn't you have softened your own ropes that way?"

"Mother! I can't! That would be selfish!"

Maybe the Sensei should have omitted ideal court ethics from her lessons.

Footsteps sounded. Ayana had been too busy to maintain the monsters. Nancy left her daughter to revive the Sensei, and ran towards the door. If she judged her forward shuffle correctly—

Two large figures appeared in front of her; to them, Nancy would be the one who appeared suddenly. Her speed and surprise were enough. Two swift blows sent the men collapsing. "Ayana! Make them sleep!"

Ayana merely waved at them, and their breathing slowed. "Bear-rhythm, mother. They are hibernating."

Ayana would do very well for herself at court, Nancy saw happily. "You please me, my daughter."

The Sensei was still only half conscious, but she and Ayana supported him between them as they went to find the proper crew. Nancy thought back to their capture. He was weak because his staff had been knocked from his hand. It had happened near here, at the top of the gangplank.

When the enemy sailors saw them from the deck, the staff was already back in the Sensei's hand. He was standing fully upright at last. The tip of his staff glowed a brilliant blue. Little tongues of flame darted from it in all directions, fell like bright hailstones, and started fires.

Mysterious explosions rocked the ship, sending red flames leaping up with rising clouds of smoke. Nancy hoped all this was illusory. Men raced around in alarm, fighting unseen enemies. Anyone who approached the three seemed to slip on something else unseen. The Sensei waved his staff like a master of the court musicians, conducting lively music.

When it was over, the seamen of Bright Harvest lay in locked cells previously occupied by the royal captain and his crew. Most of the Koreans preferred a peaceful imprisonment to any more demon attacks. Only Tiger-san and a few others were missing.

Nancy heard an alien yet familiar sound, a put-putting noise from under the bows. She ran to the side and was just in time to see Tiger-san in an odd escape craft streaking out beyond crossbow range.

"A *motor-launch*," Nancy observed regretfully. The word was foreign, and therefore foul, but an interpreter could use such language when appropriate. The little craft must have been smuggled in from some less degenerate nation, despite the various isolation taboos. Tiger-san was less inhibited by tradition than were most Japanese, it seemed. He had escaped.

"Mother, he is unimportant now. The ship is ours."

That was good, but gave Nancy one minor problem. Could she now turn back to Kunashir and her flying disc? No, not if Ayana was to be

at the palace on time – as she had to be, for Nancy remembered her being there. Nancy would have to undertake this voyage in real time, for there was no other way of returning to the confrontation between Kashtanov and Hurapua. There would be one unexpected compensation: three days at sea, totally uninterrupted, in the company of her daughter.

Nancy had never known the luxury of so much time with Ayana before.

Moonlight over a darkened sea, with stars above and glistening reflections below. A moonpath to guide the ship southward. A mother and daughter standing content under ghostly white sails that whisper above them. Little streaks of water-fire skipping from wave to wave, as silvery fish outpace the ship by leaping like stones thrown in play through the warm, gentle night. This is the moment that should last forever, this is the moment that eternity-magic should bring.

On the last morning, they were intercepted by two warships of Bright Harvest under full sail. Tiger-san must have reached the conspirators and spread a warning. Then Nancy saw other ships emerging from behind a headland: the royal fleet of the Fortunate Isles. She smiled. A good racing dove was faster than any smuggled motor-launch.

Naturally, she had instructed that no word of her preparations should reach either herself or the king. The pattern of time on this day was becoming clearer at last.

It was not a pattern she liked. In particular, Tiger-san combined old-style Japanese efficiency with foreign attitudes towards weapons. She needed to deal with him swiftly.

A brief time later, Nancy stood with Ayana behind the cover of a bamboo thicket, overlooking a lakeside fortress. This small square building housed the last of Hurapua's forces, other than those with him in the palace where all were insulated from the world outside. If Ayana was right, the fortress contained a peril which Nancy had not anticipated, or for some reason had not allowed herself to know.

"I went close to the door," Ayana said. "I called to Tiger-san to surrender. He warned me to go or be killed."

"Was it really his voice you heard?"

"Tiger-san is definitely in there," Ayana said. "The Sensei confirmed

it. There are twenty men with him and I cannot reach any of them."

Behind Nancy were two hundred of Kashtanov's city guardsmen. They could not be used for a direct attack, because of the weapon which Tiger-san was holding inside.

The fortress was at one side of a huge earth dam, with clear approaches in every direction over land and water. Visibility was only part of the problem. The city reservoir was the other part. Tiger-san had shouted that if Hurapua did not gain his throne, vials containing the black plague would be thrown into the water.

"Mother, I wish you hadn't improved things. Centralisation increases vulnerability, you know."

Nancy was aware of royal troops behind her growing impatient for action. "Ayana, your grasp of the theory is excellent. Now you have to start the practical side."

Now you have to be grown up for the rest of your life, Nancy thought. Standing there staring at the grey walls which housed the enemy, Nancy saw instead the daughter she had known on Kunashir. Tucking a magnolia bloom into her hair. Gazing at books of coloured pictures. Collecting the brown fir-cones, sharing the smell and feel of their fir essence. Visiting the volcanic steam and sulphur of the north. Talking earnestly with foreign sea captains with words she was still learning. Running across a play field made yellow by flowers. *Goodbye, my child.*

Inside that fortress were men prepared to kill a kingdom for their king.

Judging by the message from Tiger-san, he had smuggled more than a motor-launch from elsewhere. The Fortunate Isles did not breed diseases for war, but other nations did.

"So, Ayana. We have to capture him and his men, even if we have to close the reservoir and sustain half a million people on rainwater afterwards. Can't you get inside by making yourself invisible?"

"No, he would be invisible to me too."

"Oh." Nancy sighed. "I'd better tangle time again, I suppose."

Unfortunately, Tiger-san would suspect that she would come, at whatever time she tried to surprise him. He had intended bringing Ayana there from Kunashir as a hostage to lure Nancy into a trap, she thought, from what she had managed to learn about Hurapua's conspiracy. She wondered how well he had prepared for her coming.

Nancy gave the signal to her company of guardsmen. They grinned and moved into attack formation. Nancy, however, simply made a note

in her organiser, touched Ayana's hand, and went backwards through time.

Nancy walked out alone from the trees. She was entering the fortress in the previous day, before Tiger-san's occupation had begun. An attendant let her inside with the usual courtesies, and she found a convenient store-room overlooking the reservoir. Large empty crates would provide concealment later. She concentrated briefly, returning to her current present time—

The boxes were gone. Two men with drawn swords were turning about and gesturing with their free hands. They wore the sombre uniform of Bright Harvest. Nancy glimpsed a third armed man beyond the door. They had been expecting her.

"The witch!" Swords flashed towards her body.

An instant leap into yesterday saved her. Feeling shaken, Nancy went into another room and tried again.

A Korean swordsman was signalling to a companion outside the room. The second man saw her. "The witch!"

Nancy fled.

That was two circuits in time already. Too many.

In the past, she chose a room empty of people but full of boxes, so that a casual glance would not find her. She knelt in a corner, thinking. Tiger-san had men patrolling the rooms, signalling to each other. He must have studied every report and rumour about eternity-magic, and designed this defence specifically against her.

Were there any possibilities which Tiger-san might not have considered? Nancy could jump back to the design stage of the fortress, and build in some convenient secret passages to confound him. However, tampering with her own past could well leave part of her life looped off and forgotten in some side eddy of the main time-stream, as had happened to Kashtanov at the K-T boundary. She did not want to lose her time with Ayana. Also, she did not want to destabilise the space-time equilibrium of the Universe – not unless she had to. Ayana came first.

Nancy guessed that Tiger-san was keeping the plague containers poised somewhere beside water for swift use. She had eliminated two likely places so far, leaving a third waterfront room still guarded. That had to be the room. She did not know enough about what she would find; her chances there would depend on whether Tiger-san was loyal to his king or to himself.

She checked the time yet again, then went forward.

Tiger-san was there as she had guessed, and his guards were beside him, raising their swords as they saw her. On a wide table before him were three bottles of blue porcelain, all three narrow-necked and plugged like amphorae.

"Move and you die!" shouted Tiger-san, before Nancy could speak. So he intended to keep her alive for a short while at least, she thought. Mirrors reflected back and side views of her – not the slightest movement could go unseen.

Nancy asked, "Is there really sickness in those bottles?"

"I told your warriors all you need to know. Surely your spies reported my visit to the slave camp at Black Rock?"

She had confirmed that someone had been to the old enemy, and called at their bacteriological station. The thought of whole nations devastated by epidemic was frightening; she had seen it too often before. She pointed to the three blue bottles, which might or might not be full.

"You want King Kashtanov to surrender. I must be sure that your threat is real."

"I know. You must interpret the situation for him." Tiger-san smiled. Nancy had to remind herself that Ayana was now safe from him, outside and with two hundred loyal men at this moment.

These bottles could be counterfeits. The real plague would be elsewhere – unless there was a bluff within a bluff. All bottles here or elsewhere might contain plague, all of them or none of them or some. She had no choice but to deal with every blue bottle she could find – and do it swiftly.

Nancy said, "I see. Your weapon cannot be fought." (He stayed alert, impassive, watching her. It came to Nancy that he wanted the secret of her power.) She asked, "Why not use the plague to take the throne for yourself?"

"I am sworn to serve Hurapua!"

So he was an honourable man.

"Fool," Nancy said, in serf's Korean.

His anger lessened his concentration for the instant Nancy needed to snatch up the bottles and disappear. She could have time-jumped at any part of the confrontation, except that she could not have risked another level of bluff over the plague. Now she went backwards in time, and flickered sideways through the building until she found another

room, where men watching through mirrors held blue bottles over open drains.

Rapid shuffles through time – strike and snatch, strike and snatch again – all without crossing her own path. It was a manoeuvre she had practised during a childhood of unsolved crimes, except that she had never performed such a complex sequence before, and now she no longer minded people seeing it. Men from Bright Harvest were left injured and bewildered. Her own timeline must be knotted beyond imagining.

All six bottles went into the past, to a time of known safety until she could return them to the waste beyond Magadan.

She heard Tiger-san shouting, "Break them! Break them!" But the bottles were already many years away.

Through the window she saw Ayana's men arriving. It would be especially pleasant to see the ropes go around Tiger-san, as his ropes had gone around her.

The throne room is a place of dark shadows, with only the dull red glow of dying braziers amid the black emptiness. In one corner, hardly breathing, the English girl waits. Across the darkness an image of herself appears, as real as herself, every detail of features and clothing the same. Her own ghost, in night and silence, passing through without seeing her. Her own ghost, from a future or past that will never exist. It fades. The English girl takes breath again, and sees only the shadows ahead.

Nancy went forward to the one time that mattered now. She had waited and worked for three days to do this. She materialised in the bright crowded throne room.

Here, as she remembered, were Hurapua and the warriors of Bright Harvest, with King Kashtanov seated on his throne and his bemused guards lined up against the walls. She felt that she had awoken from an unpleasant dream to find it not a dream but reality. A dozen crossbows were aimed at Kashtanov, so huge a target that none could miss him. The King himself looked surprisingly calm, but he of all people should know what eternity-magic could do.

Hurapua the pretender looked as small as a child; she had forgotten how very tiny the Polynesian was, having concentrated more on Tiger-san recently. He pointed accusingly at her. "You moved!"

She made a gesture of explanation. "I told you that I would bring Ayana to the court."

A loud knock sounded at the double doors. Hurapua frowned. "This new interpreter arrives too soon. Do not let her in."

Nancy turned to watch. She knew what was about to happen.

Two dim figures appeared in the door, as if painted faintly upon the wooden panels. They moved forward and became clearer, young Ayana in green and the old Sensei in grey, coming into the throne room through the solid closed door.

Men from both Bright Harvest and the Fortunate Isles muttered uneasily. Only Nancy waited for the gentle creak which, to someone who knew, would mean that the doors were being worked normally behind Ayana and the Sensei.

No sound came. The Sensei must be controlling the noise as well.

"Stop!" Hurapua found his voice.

Kashtanov asked mildly, with only the slightest hint of the amusement he must feel, "Should a pretender to the Throne of Conquest expect servants of the rightful King to obey him?"

The Sensei bowed to Kashtanov and turned aside. Ayana went on past Nancy to face Hurapua directly, giving him a long disdainful look.

"I serve King Kashtanov. My whole life is his."

"You face King Hurapua." His tones carried complete conviction, the prime necessity for a king. "See, through that window, how my army advances on my palace!"

Ayana made no effort to look. Nancy admired her self-possession with pride as her daughter glared coldly at Hurapua and said, "Those are the royal troops waving your captured banners."

Hurapua did not look either. "You have the tricks of this other interpreter." The little man gave a shrug. "You will be welcome at my court."

That might well be true, but Ayana of all people would not be interested.

"Kashtanov is King. I am his interpreter."

Kashtanov looked approving, although officially he could not acknowledge her as a person yet. Even so, Nancy did not want to make the formal introduction. It might goad Hurapua into the old simple way of ordering crossbows fired everywhere, and that would be too quick for safety. Too many of the people here, whose lives she had manipulated ruthlessly, had become friends or more than friends to her. She wanted to give the Sensei time to act.

Hurapua said, "I will become Kashtanov. The name will be mine. It is prophesied that Kashtanov will live long, and you will serve me."

The little man possessed enough ingenuity to bend history as much as Nancy did herself. He might think that Tiger-san was still in charge at the reservoir, but he was also making his own efforts to succeed. The worrying part was that if Hurapua took the name Kashtanov, he would obviously dispose of the previous owner of the name, and would not give Ayana the life which Nancy had planned for her.

Hurapua seemed even shorter than before. Napoleon had been short, Nancy recalled.

No, this was not merely a natural lack of height, she realised. Hurapua's feet were sinking slowly into the floor.

"You can never replace King Kashtanov as you imagine..." Ayana said.

Nancy saw the soldiers of Bright Harvest settling downwards too, like men standing on quicksand. The palace guards were unaffected. That was the real skill in what the Sensei was doing.

Hurapua was not slow to realise that Ayana was delaying him, for whatever reason.

"Deceiver!"

Hurapua tried to throw himself at Ayana, but his feet seemed trapped in the floor, and only frantic arm-waving stopped him from falling. He swung his crossbow towards Kashtanov, and fired – the most important target first. (Centralisation did increase vulnerability, as Ayana had noted, and Kashtanov was the most central of all.) Hurapua's men fired with him.

Dozens of black-tipped needle bolts flashed towards the King. They passed through him, and lodged abruptly in the end wall without harming him. Kashtanov was as surprised as the rest, since to him the bowmen had seemed to aim wide. Only Nancy and the Sensei knew that while Ayana had been talking, she had been creating an illusory image and separating it from the real Kashtanov.

Ayana jumped at Hurapua, pushing him backwards into the floor. Immediately he was immobilised, convinced that he was caught fast. His followers were also trapped. Ayana shouted to the palace guards, "Disarm those men! Remove them!" The guards could see who was winning, so they hurried to obey. The invaders became prisoners.

Hurapua struggled on his back, trying to reach his fallen crossbow. Ayana took the weapon, inserted a bolt and aimed it at him. Her air

of determination looked so alarming that Nancy resumed her parental involvement. "Ayana, what are you doing?"

Ayana was very pale. "He renounces his claim to the throne, or he dies."

"Never! I will die as a King!"

Contradicting Ayana would weaken her reputation. Nancy had to agree. "The King's executioners will grant your wish."

To her relief, Ayana let the guards lift up Hurapua from the now-normal floor. With more experience Ayana would not have forced Hurapua into choosing death, but otherwise she had coped excellently, and had brought good fortune to the court during this peril. The last people from Bright Harvest were being removed. Now was the moment to bring Ayana into her destiny.

Nancy turned towards Kashtanov, and bowed.

"Your Majesty, I present to you your new interpreter." She ushered her daughter forward, with the Sensei looking on.

"Ayana, of Kunashir!"

The English girl stands outside a Japanese throne room. Against the dark timber door she seems pale, wearing a long yellow gown which somehow complements the more autumnal yellow of her hair. It is three hundred years after the nuclear war. This solitary white woman is no longer the personal interpreter to King Kashtanov: she looks eighteen, but her eyes are three centuries old. ●

Eric's recent publications include a new novella, A WRITER'S LIFE, from PS Publishing, and the paperback edition of his latest novel, NEW YORK NIGHTS, from Gollancz. NEW YORK BLUES, the second novel in his trilogy, is due out in September.
His novella DESTINY ON TARTARUS (SPECTRUM SF #2, April 2000) was a finalist for the 2001 BSFA short fiction award.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR SURVIVING THE DESTRUCTION OF STAR-PROBE X-11-57

ERIC BROWN

Do not be alarmed.

You are Susan Kuber, Chief Biology Officer aboard Star-Probe X-11-57, a faster-than-light vessel exploring the planetary systems of the Lesser Magellanic Cloud. I am the probe's matrix logic system, and you are hearing this via your sub-dermal occipital implant. There has been a malfunction in the drive system, resulting in the destabilisation of the Probe. The extent of the damage has yet to be assessed. I will keep you informed.

The malfunction has resulted in your sudden resuscitation from deep sleep. The deep sleep unit is irreparably damaged. Otherwise, I would not have awoken you until the arrival of the rescue mission. The extent of the damage necessitated the by-passing of the usual safety procedures. Because of this, you are suffering from temporary amnesia. Your memories should return within days. Meanwhile, I will guide you through the process of safely exiting the Probe.

On the cover of the hibernation pod, directly before your eyes, you will see a series of touch-commands. Press the green light and the cover will open. Step from the pod. Take care – you will be weak after three weeks in deep sleep. Exercise caution as you move. I am running a diagnostic examination of your physical state. I will be able to appraise you of your condition in precisely one minute and eleven seconds.

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Now follow the luminescent green light set into the floor of the sleep chamber. This will lead you to the rise-plate. Step upon it. To your left is the control panel. Press the touch-command bearing the numeral 3, and then hold onto the handrail while you rise.

*

The pain in your left leg is caused by an arterial thrombosis. Take care when you walk. Speed is not imperative at the moment. While emerging from deep sleep, you suffered temporal lobe epilepsy. This might occasion certain visual hallucinations, voices, and associated trauma. Ignore these. I am working to affect somatic and neurological repair. Do not be alarmed. The situation is under control.

*

I have assessed the onboard situation and can issue a status report. The drive malfunction was caused by impact with a comet, or a similar interstellar object. The drive unit underwent instant decompression and subsequent detonation. There were eighty-six human fatalities. You are the sole survivor.

We are five thousand light years from the nearest Terran outpost. I was unable to initiate standard emergency procedure and issue a mayday alarm. I estimate that it will be in the region of one month before our situation is noted and rescue effected. I am currently running analyses of the remaining supplies of air, food and water. I will appraise you of the chances of survival once I have the information.

*

When the rise-plate halts, touch the exit command on the control panel, step through the door and follow the red indicator along the corridor.

*

Only eleven per cent of the mass of Star-Probe X-11-57 remains intact. Eighty-nine per cent of the craft was destroyed as a result of the explosion.

The remaining sections of the ship are: your deep sleep pod; the access chute; four hundred cubic metres of levels one and two; various sealed corridors leading from these levels.

*

Error! Caution! Do not touch the exit command!

Remain where you are.

The area of the Probe beyond the chute hatch suffered massive structural damage in the blast, and consequently underwent decom-

pression. The area of the Probe beyond the third deck is open to the vacuum of space.

Pause while I assess the situation and evaluate possible options.

*

You must drop to level two. Press the touch-command bearing the numeral 2. When the plate halts, press the exit decal and step from the chute.

Follow the blue indicator along the corridor. There is a life-support unit on the starboard side of level 2. Within the unit is an emergency deep sleep pod. If you can reach this, your survival is ensured.

*

Halt. Turn right. Follow the red indicator in the floor. Remember, you have time. There is no need to hurry. I appreciate that the pain in your right leg is slowing you down, but do not let this affect your concentration. The life-support unit is less than three hundred metres away. You will reach it in approximately two minutes. Slow your breathing. Concentrate on every step.

*

I have calculated that sufficient air remains to sustain you for approximately one day, Terran standard. Therefore it is imperative that you reach the life-support unit and attain deep sleep.

*

Halt. Turn left. Follow the green indicator past the viewport. Ahead, you will see the hatch that gives access to the life-support unit. Enter the following sequence into the touch-command beside the hatch: 578-099.

Enter.

Before you is the pod. Touch the blue decal on the control console to open the pod. Enter your name and code into the controls. Your code is: CBO-95b.

One minute will elapse, and then a chime will sound to indicate that the system is ready. Lie in the pod and press the command to close the cover. Seconds later you will enter deep sleep.

*

Error. There is a systems error effecting the functioning of the deep sleep pod. I am endeavouring to diagnose the nature of the malfunction.

Please be patient while I run through the program. This might take a few minutes. Do not panic. Try to relax. Take deep breaths.

The error lies in the power supply to the life-support unit. The

nuclear core was destroyed in the initial blast. The hydrogen cell storage unit that should provide sufficient energy for this section of the Probe is running at below twelve per cent maximum efficiency. There is enough power to maintain the lighting and air supply, but not to run the deep sleep pod. Even if I could channel the power from the air supply and lighting, it would not be enough.

*

Calm yourself, Susan. Do not panic.

Allow me time to assess the possibilities. Through the application of logical analysis to the situation, I will arrive at a positive solution. Together, Susan, we will survive.

This may take some time.

*

Expending valuable energy in a needless exhibition of anger and self-pity will not aid your survival. I advise you to leave the life-support unit and sit before the viewport.

Now look out at the scene of stellar wonder before your eyes.

*

You were aboard Star-Probe X-11-57 for one year before the accident occurred. In that time you assessed the suitability of five planetary bodies for potential colonisation. Of those five planets, two were deemed habitable.

*

Calm yourself. I am working to attain a solution to the problem.

*

Through the viewport to your right, beyond the ruptured sponson that once held the drive units, you can see the last planet you investigated. It proved unsuitable for colonisation, but interesting nevertheless. You cannot recall landfall, Susan, but you recorded in your notes that that planet was one of the most beautiful you had ever visited.

Ammoniacal lakes. Ice massifs towering kilometres high. Magenta skies at midnight. These are mere words to me: I cannot appreciate the beauty of what they describe.

Sleep, Susan. Sleep...

*

Susan.

You have slept for ten hours. There is sufficient air in this sector of the Probe to last you approximately twelve hours. Do not panic. While you slept, I have been working.

I have a solution.

*

Listen carefully.

In the section of the Probe which survived the blast, there is another life-support unit, powered by the only other remaining hydrogen cell storage unit. Within the unit is a deep sleep pod. If you can reach the pod, your survival is guaranteed.

However, the life-support unit cannot be reached by following the colour-coded corridors in this section of the Probe.

The unit was blasted free of the main body of the Probe, and now floats in the vacuum of space, connected to the wreckage by power cables only.

Look through the viewport. At two o'clock, partially obscured by the excoriated drive nacelle, you will observe the floating life-support unit.

*

Do not despair.

You will need a vacuum environment suit in order to navigate your way across the gulf to the unit. There are three VE suits stored on level one.

Stand. Follow the blue indicator back to the chute and ride down to level one. Take your time. Impatience at this stage will gain you nothing. Your pain is an impediment, but not an insurmountable obstacle. Remember, soon you will be safe.

*

Exit the chute and follow the green indicator along the corridor as far as the first junction. Turn right. Ahead, set into the far wall, is the VE suit storage unit. Touch the open command and take a suit. They are soma-adaptive and will automatically shrink or expand to accommodate your body size. Step into the suit and pull the seal from the abdomen to the neck-line. Now affix the helmet. On your left wrist you will find a touch-command panel. Enter the code: 778-445, to initiate air supply.

*

Follow the black indicator along the corridor and turn right. Stop when you reach the bulkhead. Before you is a hatch. Look at the command panel on your left wrist. The red decal will release the VE suit's support cables. Touch it.

Affix the end of the cables to the lugs on either side of the hatch.

Steady yourself by holding the support to your left.

On the panel to the right of the hatch is a green exit command. Brace yourself against the pressure of the expelled air as it leaves the Probe.

Press the exit command.

*

Good.

Do not be afraid. You are secured by the cables. You cannot fall.

Step through the hatch. Hold onto the projections on the outside of the probe. There are many projections, designed for just such a manoeuvre.

Orient yourself and look up. At eleven o'clock, beside the drive nacelle, is the life-support unit.

Climb over the skin of the Probe until you are diametrically opposite the unit. I estimate that twenty metres will then separate you from the unit.

*

Take it easy. You have plenty of time. The suit's air supply will last eight hours. Rest when you feel tired. There is no need to exhaust yourself.

I can appreciate the pain, even if I am unable to experience it.

Cursing me will achieve nothing. I am trying to save your life, Susan.

Rest. Regain your breath. You are almost there.

*

You must go on. You have so much to live for. You are young, and healthy, with a magnificent career ahead of you in Exploration. Although you have no memory of it, your life on Earth is full and rich. You are engaged to a Pilot in the Sol Circuit division. You are very much in love. His name is Hans, and you have known each other for two years. You met in Prague, your home city. He is applying for a transfer to the Extra-Solar Star-Probe division.

You plan to explore the universe together.

You cannot give up now. Just one more push...

*

Good. Now rest.

Look up. Directly opposite is the life-support unit. When you feel ready, and only then, crouch and kick off from the skin of the Probe. Aim for the unit. Don't worry – even if you fail to reach it at the first attempt, you will be able to haul yourself back and try again.

*

In your own time.

Crouch, holding onto the supports. Aim yourself towards the unit. Kick off.

*

You're more than halfway there. Rest, and when you have recovered, crawl around the drive nacelle and observe the unit. It is now a mere five metres away.

You are almost there.

You are almost safe.

*

Crawl, little by little.

I know. The pain. You are doing well. And again. Another few metres. You're almost there, Susan. Don't give up, now that you have almost made it. One last effort. Go on...

*

Okay. Halt. Take deep breaths. I am sorry I can do nothing to ease the pain. The analgesics at my disposal can only do so much. You must be conscious in order to save yourself.

Okay, again. You are almost there.

Now launch yourself towards the unit. Crouch, aim, and kick.

*

You've made it. Hold onto the support beside the hatch. Hold on. Regain your breath. Do not cry.

Now, when you are ready, enter the sequence: 897-335 into the control-panel.

Step into the air-lock and disconnect the support cables from your VE suit. Close the hatch behind you and enter the same code into the panel beside the entry hatch.

Step inside. You are safe.

*

I am sorry.

I located eighty-five casualties, from a crew of eighty-seven. I assumed that the remains of the eighty-sixth human were destroyed in the explosion

I had no way of assessing whether or not this life-support unit was occupied.

His name is Thomas Godwin. He is forty years old, a shuttle pilot, first-class. He has a wife and three children on the colony world of Brimscombe.

*

I can do nothing to assist you in the removal of Pilot Godwin from the deep sleep pod. That would be murder. But I can do nothing to prevent you from taking that course of action. I would understand completely.

There is only sufficient air in the life-support unit to last approximately six hours.

I estimate that the rescue mission will reach the pod in a little under one month.

*

Do not cry, Susan Kuber. ●

Back Issues

Back issues are available singly (price £3.99), or as part of a subscription. Please see page 2 for ordering details.

Spectrum SF #3

Drek Yarman – Keith Roberts (part 3). A Colder War – Charles Stross. The Miracle at Kallithea – Eric Brown. Shift – Jack Deighton. Plus an Editorial, The Archive and Letters.

Spectrum SF #4

Bad Dream – John Christopher (part 1). Virtual Reality – Keith Roberts. The Ultimate Sacrifice – Eric Brown. PauseTime – Mary Soon Lee. Plus an Editorial and The Archive.

Spectrum SF #5

Bad Dream – John Christopher (part 2). Glacial – Alastair Reynolds. Poppy Day – Michael Coney. The Angels of Life and Death – Eric Brown. Plus an Editorial and The Archive.

Michael Coney appeared in SPECTRUM SF #5 (February 2001) with POPPY DAY, his first 'Peninsula' story in several years. I am pleased to be able to offer a second story in this popular series below.
He is currently working on two collaborations with Eric Brown in between his frequent trips abroad.

MEHITABEL'S MEMORIES
MICHAEL CONEY

It was that kind of a warm spring afternoon when the pollen from the broom bushes makes you sneeze. Squinting against the glare of sunlight, I watched Diane Westaway, dressed in white shorts and a blue T-shirt, on the beach below. Lovely girl. In the sea beyond her, six dolphins drove a shoal of herring towards the narrow entrance to the lagoon. Sometimes they broke surface, black streaks on bright blue, and I could hear their communal exhalation. Often the herring would take fright, and the surface would turn silver with anxious leapings and thrashings.

Once the last dolphin had passed through into the lagoon, Diane walked slowly along the beach, making sure the dolphins herded the herring into the pen she had allocated. Then she dropped the grille, imprisoning the fish while the dolphins, their job done, emerged from the water and flopped around her feet begging for rewards. I heard her laugh as a wet nose nuzzled her hand. She pointed, and the dolphins lolloped off towards the shack near the water's edge. Then she turned and looked my way. She knew I was there, lying at ease in a grassy hollow, almost concealed by broom fronds heavy with yellow flowers. She couldn't see me, but she had augmented hearing and recognised my heavy breathing. She laughed again, at me this time.

My cover blown, I laughed myself, and stood.

Then I became aware that I was not alone on the hillside. A man sat on a rocky outcrop some twenty metres away, staring down at the lagoon. I felt an instant of anger – or jealousy – or something. How long had he been there, goggling at Diane? He saw me and raised a hand in greeting. He looked innocent enough, thirtyish, dressed in

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bright green shirt and shorts. Something sat on the rock beside him; some sort of animal. I saw it move. I thought, *Diane is not my personal property.* I called a hello and shoved through the undergrowth towards him, raising a cloud of pollen.

"Pretty girl," he said.

"A friend of mine," I replied in a keep-your-dirty-hands-off kind of voice.

"How does she do that?" His asymmetric face was pale and studious. No threat.

"Do what?" I asked cautiously.

"Control the dolphins. That can't be simple training, the way they obey her. There's something else, is there?"

"She talks to them. Speaks their language. And she's been... *altered*, biologically."

"Telepathic?" he asked eagerly.

"Have you ever come across a human telepath? No, nobody has. It's just her hearing, and the way that affects her mind. She can hear things we can't. High frequencies, low frequencies, distant sounds and so on."

"Ah." He was disappointed.

"You seem interested."

"Oh..." He shrugged. "I'm an exobiologist. I'm interested in telepathy. It's part of my job – in fact it's the main part, just now." He patted the creature at his side. It was the size of a Chihuahua and vaguely similar in appearance: pale, hairless, four legged and huge-eyed. It was a fairly revolting-looking beast, but at least its features were arranged in terrestrial fashion on its head. "From Borka," he said. "You wouldn't think it's top of the food chain on its world, would you? That's what telepathy can do for a species. And it's not very intelligent by our standards."

"What's it doing here?"

He misunderstood me. "I'm giving it a breath of fresh air. It's been stuck in Carioca Jones's house all night."

"I mean, what's it doing on Earth?"

"I work for the Galactic Life Trust and the Borkan's one of my charges." I recognised the GLT logo on his green shirt. "Right now I'm on contract to *Remember!* They use the Borkan as a medium, a kind of go-between in memory transference."

"*Remember!*? The human history buffs?" *Remember!* were holding a

convention on the Peninsula; I'd seen it advertised. Carioca Jones was involved in some kind of PR role.

He looked quite proud of his connection with this nonsense. "Mehitabel arrived last night," he said in almost reverent terms. "With Rhiannon," he added. I glanced at him quickly. Was that a slight flush on his smooth face? Oh-ho!

I'd heard of Mehitabel; who hasn't? She's the last in a line of women who have passed their memory on, one to the next, for several hundred years. I was going to say generation to generation, but that wouldn't be accurate because each woman is a clone-daughter of the previous one, right back to the original Rachel. Mehitabel is around ninety years old and her clone-daughter Rhiannon is in her mid-twenties. I've never met either of them, and I don't really want to. A cult has grown up around them, maintaining that their long memory is in some way more valid than any old history disc. They call it a 'precious heritage', the only true record of time's passage.

Rubbish, of course. Mehitabel and her predecessor's view of time's passage is no more objective than any other historian's view, and far more narrow in its scope. And to transfer the memories from one clone to the next they use a telepathic medium, presumably this strange-looking Borkan. An alien dealing with human brain-waves? That must give plenty of opportunity for mistranslation.

A moment of excitement followed. While I'd been contemplating the foregoing, the Borkan had hopped down from its rock and was snuffling four-legged at the undergrowth, probably looking for a life-form to dominate. A rustling in the bushes announced the approach of a worthy adversary.

"Look out!" I shouted.

"What?"

"Grab your Borkan, quick!" I jumped on the rock to get my feet clear of the ground.

A land shark nosed out of the broom, moving in that stealthy side-winding manner they use for stalking. Its cold eyes were fixed on the meaty little Borkan. You don't mess with land sharks.

But the biologist regarded the brute with surprising calm. "What the hell is that thing?"

"Land shark. Somebody's pet gone feral. Dangerous bastards."

"How does it breathe?" He was professionally interested. The Borkan watched the shark approach.

"What the hell does it matter? Oxygenator implanted behind the gills, if you must know. Do you want your Borkan eaten, for God's sake?"

He chuckled. "It's more than a match for a monstrosity like that. Are they popular as pets around here, these brutes?"

The shark had brought its tail forward, coiling itself for the final spring.

The Borkan watched with big eyes.

I awaited the grisly climax.

It's difficult to describe what happened next. The shark leaped, but not at the Borkan. It shot up vertically, twisting at the same time, uttering a kind of hissing yelp. When it landed, it was facing away from us. It was gone in an instant, and the broom fronds shook in a rapidly extending line across the hillside. I've never known a land shark move so fast.

"What the hell happened?"

The biologist laughed. "Telepathy works both ways with the Borkan. It recognised the shark as an enemy, so it planted a flight response in its mind."

"A flight response? Response to what?"

"An image the shark didn't care for, I guess. Whatever it was, it worked." He looked up. "Here comes your friend."

Diane climbed the hillside towards us, long legs in short shorts. A couple of dolphins frolicked at her heels. "What are you two up to?" she called.

"Don't let the dolphins get near this little fellow here," I warned her.

The biologist smiled. "It's okay, they're friendly. He'll see them as members of his own species. He sees things two ways, and only two ways. Them and us."

We introduced ourselves. His name was Jack Pirelli. Jack introduced the Borkan. The Borkan and the dolphins began to play clumsily together.

Diane was fascinated. "I could do with one of those, to help with the dolphins. Is it… reading my mind, right now?"

"No. You have to open your mind in a certain way. It takes practice. I can do it, and Mehitabel and Rhiannon, of course. But the average person, no. In any case, the Borkan wouldn't understand what it received."

"That's a bloody good thing," said Diane, looking at me with a twinkle in her eye. She knows I fancy her, but I know I'm too damned old for her and, to be truthful, too damned crotchety. I like her too much to burden her with my foibles.

She sat between us and we watched the animals playing, and discussed the *Remember!* cranks, and fish-farming and life generally, while the afternoon grew into cool evening and the sea turned a rosy red. A lone sling-glider flitted across the bay, glowing crimson in the sun's dying rays.

Jack's eyes followed it. "Wonderful sport," he said.

"You glide?" I was surprised. He didn't look the sling-gliding type. Members of our club run to the rugged and the muscular.

"Love it."

I've since wondered about what I said next. Was it friendly hospitality offered to a stranger? Or was it a challenge; a male bid for supremacy with Diane sitting between us, young and beautiful?

I said, "How would you like to come along to our club? I'll introduce you around tomorrow. You could get some gliding in during the few days you've got here."

His face lit up with pleasure. "I'd like to take you up on that."

As he strode off through the bush, the Borkan on his shoulder, Diane said, "He doesn't look the sling-glider type to me, Joe."

Sling-gliding is famous as Earth's most perilous sport. Our club takes a perverse pride in this notoriety and resists any attempt to dilute the element of danger by installing fail-safe devices. Here on the Peninsula, a sling-glider's safety depends entirely on his own skill and the speed of his reactions. Me? I still have my glider. One day soon I'll recover my nerve.

"We'll try him on the training catapult first," I said uneasily.

Jack's introduction to the Peninsula sling-gliding club was postponed by a visiphone call I received soon after breakfast the following morning. The face of the ageing ex-3V star Carioca Jones appeared on the screen, blurred to hide the wrinkles.

"Joe?" she queried sharply.

"And how are you this morning, Carioca?"

"Be quiet and listen. That slitheskin robe you sold me last week isn't responding, for heaven's sake! Last night I was with… It's none of your damned business who I was with. Be that as it may, the robe failed to

respond. *Utterly*. It remained a most *repulsive* brown, just as it came out of the box. I've never been so embarrassed in my life!"

"Maybe you just didn't fancy the guy," I suggested carefully. My robes are guaranteed to change colour according to the emotions of the wearer, and they generally do. Red is the preferred colour for sexual high-jinks.

"Fancying doesn't come into it! I'm an *actress*, you silly little man! I can turn on whatever damned emotion I please." Her tone changed abruptly. "Really, Joe *darling*, it's not so much last night's fiasco, humiliating though it might have been, had not Walter been such a thick-skinned little *toad*. It's a matter of value for money, and on that score I am nobody's fool. I *demand* that you replace that robe immediately, so that I can wear it at the *Remember!* ceremony. I hardly need to remind you that I am the Mistress of Ceremonies, and the 3V cameras will be there."

"Not Walter *Ramsbottom*?" My attention had come to a crashing halt a few sentences back.

"I've already told you, Joe *darling*, it's none of your damned business. Now get over here *tout de suite*, or I shall take my business elsewhere."

An empty threat. Carioca knew perfectly well that my slitheskin is the best available. All the same one must promote customer satisfaction. Within ten minutes I was on my way to her aerial house, The Stars, wondering if her mercurial mood swings had somehow worn the robe out.

A crowd of some fifty people milled around the plinth at the base of Carioca's house – pointlessly, because the house hovered aloft like a giant kite against the blue of a perfect sky, tethered to the plinth by a long cable. I asked a tall, scholarly-looking man what was going on.

"Mehitabel's up there," he said in awed tones. He wore a blue scooter-cycling helmet with a large red R on the front. Most of them did.

I pressed the communicator on the plinth. "It's me, Joe Sagar," I announced. "Permission to come aboard?" I added facetiously.

The winch whined and the cable took up the strain of the antigravity shield supporting the house, which began to drop slowly towards us. My stock with the crowd rose sky-high and people regarded me with respect and admiration. I mention this because it's a rare occurrence.

I stepped aboard and we began to rise again. Carioca tottered towards me on dangerously high heels. "Joe, my *sweetie*! Come and meet my dearest friends!"

An ancient creature of bullfrog aspect in a wheelchair proved to be Mehitabel, the memory queen. "Can you believe she's well over a hundred?" whispered Carioca loudly. Well, I could, quite easily. Drip bottles were hung above her wheelchair like birthday balloons and, even more unpleasant to contemplate, similar bottles stood in a row on the chair's footrest, filling with liquids of varying colours and consistency. Carioca was not wearing slitheskin, and no wonder.

"And this is *dear* Rhiannon." I shook hands with a dark-haired young woman of around twenty, with a pale face and a hunted look.

"And Tom Wright, our producer."

Tom, short and wiry, also looked hunted. In fact, as I accepted a glass of something fizzy it struck me that the atmosphere in The Stars was not the warmest. I felt as if I'd walked in on the second act of something.

Ignoring me, Tom said, "Let's just give it another try, Rhiannon, shall we? And this time, please get some feeling into it. You're receiving a whole year's worth of new memories. At least look surprised or something. Remember, when we do the real thing you only have one chance. Here—" He picked up the Borkan, which I hadn't noticed it as it dozed on a chair. "Hold it against your head. Emote, for God's sake!"

"But this is all wrong," Rhiannon burst out, almost in tears. "It's not the way it happens. I *won't* feel surprised. I won't feel *anything*. I won't even know I've *got* new memories. It'll be as though I've always had them."

Tom groaned. "Well, for God's sake! Where's the drama, tell me that? I might as well record the tide coming in."

"I'm quite sure it'll be all right on the night, Tom *darling*," Carioca said.

"I don't want to do it!" Rhiannon suddenly shouted, startling us all. "I don't want to! And I'm not going to!"

"We've been through all this," Mehitabel croaked, "and you've *got* to."

By now I'd backed off into a corner, trying to appear invisible. Carioca has a bad habit of drawing me into her conflicts. Besides, this was all beyond my understanding. Rhiannon was a clone of Mehitabel. How the hell could they disagree on anything? They should be of one mind, surely? They were behaving more like daughter and mother.

"Well, I'm not going to! Not this time." Rhiannon offered a compromise. "We used to do it every five years, and that was quite

enough. Maybe next year. Not now. You can forget it for now, all of you."

"Forget it, can we?" Mehitabel snarled. "On that subject, there's something in your memory that I could jog, my girl. Just you be careful."

"Oh, for God's sake, not that again! Not the Double-Aitch. Not the memory so terrible you swore never to talk about it."

"Not all memories are good ones, as well you know. I'm an old woman," whimpered Mehitabel, turning on the sob stuff. "I haven't got long. I may not be alive next year, and my precious memories will have died with me."

"Just you tell me what's so precious about your memories of this past year that they have to be dumped into *my* head," Rhiannon snapped, taking the offensive. "I've already got all the previous stuff, and a load of junk it is too. Hundreds of years of getting out of bed and eating breakfast and showering and chattering to bores and worrying and common colds and diarrhoea and going back to bed. Where's the value in all that stuff, tell me that? Tell me, Mehitabel!"

A fit of coughing racked Mehitabel's puny frame and her answer was unintelligible apart from the words, 'priceless heritage.'

"Now look what you've done!" Carioca cried, fiddling anxiously with the bottles on Mehitabel's chair. The old woman had stopped coughing but her eyes were closed and her mouth had dropped loosely agape. "You've made her ill. And we have *planeloads* of guests coming in."

"She's good at looking ill. All old people are." Rhiannon thrust the Borkan into Carioca's arms. "And there's something else you should all know, if you're on her side. Her short-term memory's all shot to pieces, and her long-term's getting woozy. Her mind's going. It's not surprising at her age. Dumping her shaky old memories into my mind is going to screw up what I remember from the last time. Each transfer's a complete replacement, see? It wipes the previous stuff out, just like saving a computer file. And—" There was a catch in her voice, "—it wipes out my own memories of the past year, too. All of them."

"Aha!" Mehitabel effected an instant recovery. "Now we're coming to the point. It's that bloody biologist, isn't it? You think you're in love with him!"

"That's neither here nor there. I want my *own* memories. I'm sick of starting over with a new set every year. I can't even remember what happened to me when I was fifteen. Did I have a nice birthday party? Did I have a boy-friend? And the stuff I learned at school – all wasted!

Instead, everything I remember is a second-hand. I want a mind of my own – a life of my own. I want to be me!"

Mehitabel changed tack. "Don't think I don't understand how you feel, Rhiannon. I felt like you, once. I went through a time of doubt. I could have allowed myself to be selfish. But I thought of all those clone-parents who had gone before me, and all those wonderful memories I'd inherited from them. Not to mention the devoted followers who believe in us and what we're doing. I'm not saying I wasn't tempted. But I stood firm. And remember – I know how you feel about Jack Pirelli. I have eyes. Jack's memory will be safe, because it's in my memory too."

It sounded like an outrageous load of hogwash, but then I was not a devoted follower. I collected the offending slitheskin robe and got out of there quickly, before my pity for Rhiannon made me say something I'd regret.

Jack was already waiting for me outside the entrance to the sling-gliding club. I took him in and introduced him to a few notables. As usual on a Saturday, the place was full and the barman overworked. Bryce Alcester, our brisk little secretary, was slipping among the members, ostensibly dispensing goodwill but actually judging what shape they were in. Nobody is allowed in a glider if they're the least bit the worse for drink. After a moment Bryce appeared at my elbow, drawing me into a quiet corner.

"This guest of yours, Joe. This Pirelli fellow. Wants to glide. Looks a tad puny to me, if you don't mind my saying so."

From one as puny as Bryce himself, this was a laugh. "He assures me he's flown before. Anyway, we're giving him a training run from the Catapult, to see what he can do. Don't worry, Bryce."

He muttered something about grave doubts, and sidled off. He likes to disseminate uncertainty, does Bryce. I often wonder why we don't simply vote him out, but the truth is nobody else wants the secretary's job. It's unpaid, for one thing. I was making my way back to Jack when a disturbance arose at the entrance to the bar, and I soon heard familiar, shrill tones.

"As a member of this club, you *silly* little man, may I remind you I have the right to bring whomsoever I like as guests?"

And Bryce's equally shrill tones, "And may I remind you we have a strict rule about animals!"

"That is the most *appallingly* racist attitude I have ever encountered in my *entire* life. I shall report you to the club committee and, believe you me, to the Species Relations Board."

Jack Pirelli and I almost collided as we converged on the scene. A bristling Bryce faced Carioca's party, which included Mehitabel wheeled by Rhiannon; the director, whatever his name was; a couple of hangers-on and, cradled in Carioca's arms, the Borkan. Probably Carioca was trying to befriend the little fellow to pre-empt any contretemps at the *Remember!* ceremony.

Jack explained to Bryce.

"An alien?" the secretary queried sceptically. "Looks more like some kind of dog to me."

Jack produced documentation.

"And what," Carioca crowed, "do you have to say to *that*, my good man?"

"A natural mistake." Bryce clutched at a straw. "I assume the, er, alien is intelligent?"

"The Borkan is an essential member of our transference team and will feature in the 3V broadcast of the *Remember!* ceremony."

"Can't he speak for himself?" Frustration and anger got the better of Bryce's manners. "What's his name, Rover?"

"You would not be able to pronounce it," Carioca said in conclusive tones. "Come, people. We will proceed to the spectators' gallery." And the group moved off.

All except Rhiannon. "Hello, Jack," she said, moving close and looking up into his eyes.

He flushed slightly. "I didn't know you were coming here."

"Aren't you pleased to see me?"

"Of course. But..." He looked after Mehitabel's retreating chair with the drip bags wobbling. Then he shrugged and hugged her briefly. "What the hell. But I don't think we should be too obvious when the old girl's around. She's a bit... sensitive about us."

"I've come to watch you gliding." Her eyes were alight with adoration.

I hoped the adoration wasn't misplaced. Fifteen minutes later we had him all kitted out and lying on the Horse, harnessed up, the lightweight training glider on his back.

A word of explanation here. Our sling-gliding trainer consists of a trolley known as the Horse because of its resemblance to a piece of

gymnasium equipment, running on an upwardly-inclined track some fifty metres long, pointing out to sea. Behind the Horse is the Piston, and behind that a steam-powered boiler. The whole caboodle is known as the Catapult. You can guess the purpose of all this. It's primitive, but it works.

Jack lay face-down on the Horse, grinning at me sideways from under the wings of his glider. He looked pretty confident. Rhiannon fussed over him, checking his harness. "Okay, okay," Jack said impatiently. "Launch me."

I scanned the sky. All clear. No gliders in sight; most members were having their lunch. I checked the windsock. It was hanging limp. I checked the boiler pressure. Close to maximum, a wisp of steam drifting from the safety valve. I positioned myself beside the Piston. "Ready?"

"Ready!"

"Go for it!" I shouted and shoved down the lever, admitting steam to the long cylinder.

The Piston rod moved, slowly at first but accelerating rapidly. The Horse rolled up the ramp, the rattle of its wheels almost instantly becoming a roar. The Piston reached the end of the cylinder and hit the hydraulic buffer with a cushioned thud. The Horse roared on, reached the end of the ramp and leaped into the air, the retrieval cable snaking behind. Rhiannon screamed.

Once, a guy froze and didn't release in time. The jerk of the cable broke his neck and he was dead when we reeled him in, still strapped to the Horse.

But Jack hit the release and rose smoothly away from the Horse, which checked at the extremity of its cable and tumbled into the sea. I activated the retrieval mechanism and the cable began to wind it in.

And Jack put on a show for our benefit.

He rose vertically into the noonday sun until we lost sight of him, stalled out and dived. The next thing we knew was the swish of wind on wings as he came up on us from behind, followed the line of the ramp about two metres above the rusty rails, banked right towards the clubhouse and pulled into a tight turn around the spectators' gallery. It's a wonder the g-force didn't strip the glider's wings off. I saw Carioca on the balcony; she ducked as he passed overhead. Then out to sea, and a 360 degree roll that looked to be inches above the waves. Now Rhiannon was out on the balcony too. She'd probably guessed that we'd

had doubts. Jack gained height, banked towards us, rose into a tight loop and, levelling out of it, stalled and dropped into shallow water just off the beach. A perfect landing. He waded ashore, unbuckling the glider, grinning.

Rhiannon ran to meet him. They kissed for a long time.

Bryce Alcester strutted towards me like an enraged fighting cock, all ready to give us hell for reckless flying.

Glancing up at the spectator's gallery, I saw Mehitabel staring down at the couple. I've rarely seen so much venom in a human face – it shook me to the extent that I think I told Bryce to bugger off, or similar words.

We made our way to the dining room. I was thinking deeply, while Jack and Rhiannon were involved in an orgy of mutual admiration. Bryce was seething and threatening disciplinary measures.

Mehitabel lost no time in offering her opinion. "You have no idea of the value of life, Mr Pirelli," she croaked. "I detest the very notion of people risking their necks simply to impress other people. It is irresponsibility, pure and simple. When you reach my age, which I doubt you will, you will perhaps have gained some idea of just how precious the gift of life is. If you'd died up there in that flimsy craft, all the experience and knowledge you've gained would have been wasted. Frankly, I don't think you're a suitable person to have care of the Borkan, and I shall tell your superiors so." She gasped and subsided into a soft coughing.

Amazingly, Carioca offered a contrary opinion. "Well, you have to admit it was *rather* exciting," she said mildly. I could only assume the frog-like old battle-axe was getting her down.

Mehitabel shot her a poisonous glance. "I am too old to withstand excitement," she wheezed, laying a wizened hand on pendulous dugs. "That terrifying exhibition has wearied me utterly and my life-force is running low. We will hold the *Remember!* transference ceremony tomorrow afternoon, before it is too late. That is Sunday. It is appropriate."

"No!" Rhiannon cried.

"But surely your fans will require more notice," Carioca suggested, surprised.

"My *followers* are here, Miss Jones. They have been here for days, locally and in Louise, awaiting the word. And now I have spoken."

"Not tomorrow, Mehitabel!" Rhiannon was in tears. "Please don't make it tomorrow!"

Mehitabel closed her eyes. "Tomorrow will be the day."

It was a sad and silent meal that followed. Nobody felt like talking except Mehitabel, who from time to time would mention aspects of the ceremony to Tom Whatsisname, the producer. At one point Walter Ramsbottom lumbered across and chatted for a moment. I watched him and Carioca closely but there was no sign of that frisson that exists between people who have recently slept together. Anyway, sex with Ramsbottom must resemble being pinned to the ground by a hippo. It had to be some other Walter. Soon our monosyllabic replies discouraged him and he wandered elsewhere.

Helmeted cult members began to arrive, kneeling around Mehitabel's chair and begging for crumbs of wisdom. Those who couldn't get near her began to fawn over Rhiannon as a close second in the memory stakes. Bryce Alcester tried to shoo them away, but was defeated by weight of numbers. Jack rose and made for the door. I joined him.

"I've got to get away from all this," he muttered. "Can you rustle me up a crew?"

"You want to go gliding right now?"

"A lot more fun that listening to those idiots asking Mehitabel those damn-fool history questions. I don't see the point of it all. And I don't like the way Rhiannon goes along with it. It's as though she feels Mehitabel owns her, because she's her clone."

Something had been bugging me since yesterday. "Why do the fans wear those scoot helmets?"

He laughed shortly. "Mostly symbolism. It's to protect the brain, in case they get a knock on the head and forget something. Even their tiny little memories are precious, so they reckon. Bloody nonsense. There's plenty *I'd* like to forget. Now what about that crew?"

Doug Marshall was pleased to oblige; it's always easy to get Doug on the water. He doesn't sling-glide himself any more, not since he broke both legs in a mistimed landing. But he has a sleek and beautiful hydrofoil boat equipped for gliding, which means that it has the big titanium D-shaped Eye which can be extended from the portside of the hull. We tested it. It rolled out smoothly on its runners and Jack nodded, satisfied.

Next we examined Doug's Whip. This lay on rubber rollers on the slipway, seventy metres of Ultrafibre-X rod, twenty centimetres thick, translucent green, incredibly light and rigid. Jack picked up the end of it in one hand; it hardly sagged. He tapped it with a spanner. It rang

like a bell, resonating through its whole length. He examined the bracket that attaches the Whip to the starboard side of the boat. Then he inspected my glider in the nearby park. It's different from the training glider he'd used earlier; this one's built for speeds up to 400 kph and attendant g-forces. We watched him twanging the wires and jiggling the metalwork.

"He seems to know what he's doing," Doug said.

"He can fly. Did you see him earlier?

Doug chuckled. "I thought Bryce was going to have a stroke."

Jack returned from the park with the glider on his back, grinning with excitement. People always look happy when they're going sling-gliding. It's to hide the fear. Or maybe not; maybe I'm the only one who gets scared.

We strapped Jack into the glider, helped him to the slipway and fastened the water-skis to his feet. We rolled the Whip out into the water and secured the end to the snap fastening on his harness. Then we climbed aboard Doug's boat and motored alongside the length of the Whip. Reaching the end, we attached it to the bracket on the starboard side of the boat. We motored slowly out into the Strait, towing the Whip, at the far end of which Jack was rising up onto his water-skis.

I've described all this in detail because of what happened soon afterwards. I sat in the stern of the boat as observer. Doug was at the wheel.

Jack raised an arm. I touched Doug's shoulder, and heard the roar of the engine deepen. The Whip rose from the water and I felt the boat's motion steady as it climbed onto the foils. At the far end of the Whip, the glider began to rise like a kite. Jack kicked off the skis and thrust his legs back into the fuselage. The glider climbed steadily. I tapped Doug's shoulder twice. He hit the water brakes, slamming me into the backrest. I watched as the Whip swung forward until it extended abeam of us like a slender arm, and Jack was flying level with us, seventy metres to starboard and some ten metres above the water. While this had been going on Doug had extended the Eye to port, its weight balancing the boat. So far so good. I reached out and dropped the outer pin into the bracket, locking the Whip into position. Now it could move in the vertical plane, but not in the horizontal.

I tapped Doug on the shoulder and swivelled my seat so that I was facing sideways, looking along the Whip towards Jack. Doug gave the boat full throttle and we bounded forwards again.

I could see the Fulcrum dead ahead, rising from the water in the middle of the Strait. A huge concrete post, the Fulcrum is set into massive underwater foundations and built to take any conceivable strain. The Hook projects from its flank, titanium, glittering in the sunlight, pivoted horizontally around the Fulcrum. Together the three of us raced towards the Hook at around 150 kph. Everything going according to plan.

Now came the tricky bit.

Doug veered to starboard, just slightly, lining up the Eye with the Hook. Boats frequently miss the Hook, giving the Fulcrum too wide a berth, their skippers frightened of a deadly collision. But Doug gauged it to a nicety. As the Fulcrum flashed past us, the Hook engaged our Eye, flinging the boat into a tight left turn. You don't have much control at this point. The g-force pressed Doug into a well-padded pillar beside his seat. My harness stretched, absorbing most of the force as I was flung from my seat into a foam shock absorber opposite, then snapped me back into the seat almost instantly.

Simultaneously the engine cut.

I checked the line of the Whip. It was bent back in a gigantic arc, storing energy from the boat's quick turn, ready to sling Jack into the blue. The boat slowed, wallowing, then stopped suddenly as the Fulcrum locked, preventing us from sliding backwards with the reaction to the Whip's action.

The Whip began to straighten. The tip, with Jack and his glider still attached, began to accelerate forwards like a striking cobra. The release speed can be close to 350 kph. Timing is of the essence. Foolhardy pilots will wait until the last possible moment before hitting their release, others will play it safe. I had a feeling Jack was one of the former. The boat shuddered as the speed of the glider made the Whip vibrate.

"Release!" I found myself yelling. Jack couldn't hear me out there, of course.

The Whip passed the optimum speed and began to decelerate.

Jack hadn't released.

It was too late. The Whip had begun to recoil. The glider, dragged backwards, was fluttering like a wounded bird. I saw a piece of fuselage fall away. The glider smashed into the water, then bounced high. The Whip swung forward again, still full of killing potential.

I heard Doug groan. "Stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid." We play down accidents, at the Club. We keep a stiff upper lip. We have a Committee

Enquiry, we report, then we try to forget it. Sling-gliding is a dangerous sport, so people die. One was dying now.

The Whip swung back and forth, slowing as it bounced off the water, and with each swing there was less of Jack and the glider attached to the end of it. Finally it stopped, lying still in the water, and we uncoupled from the hook and motored slowly out. There was some stuff there, metal and leather and flesh and bone; and we found some more around the area. We didn't know whether to leave it all for the fish, or what. In the end we brought it over the side and arranged it in roughly human shape on an old blue tarpaulin. I don't remember much else, except crying and being sick over the side. Stiff upper lips don't always work.

I do remember our arrival at the dock, and the insatiable curiosity of Mehitabel who wheeled close as we carried the tarp ashore. It fell open when we laid it on the slipway. Those frog eyes took in every morsel.

Rhiannon was not there, thank God.

The rest of the afternoon was best forgotten, what with the recriminations and Bryce Alcester throwing his minuscule weight around. By evening a kind of maudlin wake had developed, led by Doug Marshall. I got home late, took an anti-hangover shot and crawled into bed, hoping to sleep the clock around.

That hope was dashed. Early the following morning I was aroused by the doorbell. I pulled on my dressing-gown and went downstairs.

The Borkan in my living room greeted me with a faint twittering. It had been placed in my care yesterday because I was deemed to be experienced in animal welfare by virtue of breeding slithes. "I don't want the little brute around me," Mehitabel had said flatly. "I'm getting bad vibes from him." And Carioca, who had championed the Borkan in the dispute with Bryce, had by now changed her tune. "I'm *certainly* not having him in my house. Me, a woman alone with this creature reading my every thought? No, thank you very much." Saddened by the way the strange little fellow was losing support, I'd taken it on. It had spent the night on the sofa.

I opened the door. To my surprise Rhiannon stood there, her face puffy from crying.

"Can I come in?"

I led the way into the living room, sat her down and got us two

revivers from the dispenser, giving mine an extra shot of caffeine. I sat opposite. We drank. I raised my eyebrows enquiringly. She hadn't spoken since I'd let her in.

At last she said, "I'm so sorry to bother you, Joe, but I don't know who else to talk to. I certainly can't talk to Mehitabel. You're the only person with a spark of understanding around here, so here I am."

She was complimenting me. This was a first, indeed. Usually I'm the focus of censure. "If I can help in any way…" I muttered. I didn't want to talk about Jack's accident, if that was what she'd come about. I could still picture the Whip bouncing across the surface, scattering bits. I'd dreamed about it several times last night and woken with pounding heart, telling myself it was only a dream. Then I'd remembered it had really happened. "I didn't see you in the Club after lunch."

"I left soon after you and Jack. I didn't know he was going gliding again. I just couldn't stand all that nonsense at the table with our followers, so I went for a long walk to think things over. I missed the… the accident." Suddenly she buried her head in her hands. "Should I have been there?" she muttered indistinctly. "Maybe I could have persuaded him not to go. But he's been sling-gliding before, lots of times." She looked up at me, tears in her eyes.

"It was just one of those things. Unfamiliar equipment and a slight misjudgement. It happens to us all. But it's not usually serious. I remember a time—" Aware that I was talking my way into a minefield, I broke off and changed the subject. "Why was Mehitabel so much against you and Jack?"

"Oh…" She shrugged helplessly. "All kinds of things. Mainly that I have a duty to our followers and to her, and Jack is a needless distraction from my life's purpose." She gulped. "And she equates love with reproduction, and in her view sex is unnecessary, and consequently men are unnecessary. And babies. And the whole family thing. I suppose it's understandable: she comes from a long line of clones, but… I've *seen* families, Joe. I've seen parents with their children. I like what I've seen. I wouldn't mind being a part of all that. And I was stupid enough to lose my temper one day and tell Mehitabel how I felt."

I was out of my depth. "But you're a free agent, surely? Why not just refuse any more transfers? Just tell her to bugger off. She has no hold over you, has she?" And then I remembered a conversation in The Stars. Mehitabel had said, *"There's something in your memory that I could jog, my girl. Just you be careful."*

I asked Rhiannon about it.

"She's always threatening me with that. It's something that happened to one of her clone ancestors. Something so horrible that it would poison my mind forever, she says. I make a joke of it; I call it the Hideous Happening. I abbreviate it to the Double-Aitch, to annoy her."

"But surely you know it already."

She sighed. "There's so much in my mind, so much junk. It takes me ages of linking one event with another to get back to any specific memory. I mean, do *you* remember all you know, Joe? Or do you find you need something to jog your memory, then it all comes back?"

"I need jogging," I said ruefully. "Too often, lately."

"I'm not sure Mehitabel even remembers the Hideous Happening herself. Maybe it's just a useful weapon. All the same..." She went all thoughtful on me. The Double-Aitch was not such a joke as she pretended. "I'd really rather not know what it is," she said at last.

"She could be bluffing."

"I don't think so."

"Then just leave. Run away. Never see her again. She doesn't own you."

"But in a way she does."

She caught sight of the Borkan on the sofa and picked him up. It clung to her like a baby koala to its mother. She continued. "When all's said and done, Mehitabel gave me life. I owe her everything for that."

"But this cult. It's all nonsense."

"More so than anyone realises," she said sadly. "I'm beginning to question almost every memory I have. I've proved so many of them false. Even the true ones are all coloured by Mehitabel's weird views on things. The whole thing's a gigantic sham and a couple of days ago I was ready to say to hell with it all. But now Jack's gone. And my memories of last year with him are just so painful now, I can hardly stand it. Perhaps it would be best to lose them..."

She went shortly afterwards, leaving me with a feeling of foreboding.

After a light lunch I drove Rhiannon and the Borkan to the *Remember!* ceremony. I'd given up trying to persuade her to run out on Mehitabel. At the time I thought the clone bond was too strong, to say nothing of the sense of duty. We drove in silence and arrived at The Stars to find a crowd of a hundred or so assembled, most of them

in blue helmets with the red R. The ceremony was to be held on the plinth of Carioca's house.

"The idea is," said the producer, whose name was Tom, "that Mehitabel, Rhiannon and a couple of top cultists have a get-together in The Stars first. They'll be aloft. A pep talk, working themselves up to the ceremony. Then the house will descend to the plinth and they'll step out." His eyes were alight with enthusiasm. "Kind of stately. As though they've come down from heaven, you understand? Symbolic. Then the house will go up a short way. Useful cover in case it rains, although the weather's looking pretty good at the moment."

"Sounds all right," I said automatically, watching Rhiannon entering The Stars holding the Borkan. Like a lamb to the slaughter, I found myself thinking. I could see Mehitabel in the background, scowling from her wheelchair. Carioca stepped forward and embraced Rhiannon comprehensively; it was sad that Rhiannon's best friend in there was that hypocritical old harridan. Suddenly I remembered Carioca's robe and hurried forward, shoving the box into her arms as she was releasing Rhiannon.

"Thank you, Joe *darling*," she crooned for the cameras.

The door shut, the winch whirred and The Stars ascended into a cloudless sky.

A helmeted middle-aged woman selected me as recipient of her views. "They're *inseparable*, of course," she gushed. "So typical of cloneship. They live together, they do everything together so that the memory transfer won't cause too much trauma to Rhiannon. Much of the last year will be in her mind already, just waiting to be reinforced by Mehitabel. So wonderful. Such a sacrifice, don't you think? And for the benefit of us all."

"Just think of all the useful contributions to society Mehitabel's made in her lifetime," I enthused. "As compared to young people with fresh minds."

This caused a short silence as my companion racked her brains. "It's wonderful," she said at last. "Regular history can be so *political*, don't you think? Mehitabel gives it the human touch. Have you ever attended one of her, er, *gatherings*? She doesn't like to call them lectures, of course."

"Can't say I've ever had the pleasure," I said.

Conversation continued in this vein for a few minutes, until I excused myself and moved on. But it seemed I'd attained a celebrity status by arriving with Rhiannon, not to mention handing Carioca

her robe, and I was almost immediately buttonholed again. In the end I slunk back to my car and pretended to be reading something of vital interest; actually the vehicle's instruction manual. In due course I heard the winch, and saw The Stars descending.

Mehitabel emerged first, wheeled by Carioca. Then came Rhiannon carrying the Borkan; and lastly the two disciples, looking important. After the initial awed buzz, a reverent silence fell. Carioca stepped forward, smiling into the cameras.

"Friends!" she cried. "Followers! Seekers after the true past! Welcome to the ceremony of remembrance!" She was wearing the robe. It was glowing a pleasant pink; the colour of excitement without undue sexual overtones. It was, of course, exactly the same robe she'd returned to me yesterday. There had been nothing wrong with it; she'd simply had too many mood swings in too short a time. Her face was pink too, her mouth the usual crimson gash. She was enjoying herself. She didn't give a damn for the *Remember!* people as such, but as an audience she loved them.

There was a brief pause as The Stars rose empty into the sky and the big names reassembled on the plinth; Carioca standing to the right foreground, Mehitabel in her wheelchair at the centre and Rhiannon on a canvas chair to the left, the Borkan clinging to her. The little fellow seemed alarmed by the hubbub; I wondered if it was picking up confused mental images from the crowd.

"Memory," Carioca cried. Then, as the audience stilled, she repeated quietly, with spurious thoughtfulness, "Memory. What is memory? Is it simply an animal instinct, to warn us against repeating mistakes? I think not. Is it a God-given gift perhaps, to enrich our lives, to furnish our minds with beauty, to…"

I stopped listening about then. I'd heard Carioca holding forth too any times. I drifted off in to a fantasy about Diane, to be jerked back into the present some minutes later by a screech from Mehitabel.

"For God's sake shut up and let's get on with it, woman!"

Carioca swung round, flustered and angry. "*What* did you say?"

"You heard. Rhiannon! Bring me that animal and come and sit beside me." Mehitabel tapped the footrest of her chair with her stick, impatiently. She'd been out of the limelight for long enough. I felt an emptiness in my stomach as I saw the expression on her face. There was triumph there. Why? What sick delight lay waiting within the catacombs of that ancient mind?

"Well, *really*!" Carioca exclaimed.

Rhiannon was very pale. She stood, moved her chair next to Mehitabel, and sat down again, the Borkan still clinging. Mehitabel reached out and clawed the creature away, settling it on her right shoulder. Then she raised her left hand.

Her followers knelt. I didn't, of course. I received a withering stare from Carioca, but I remained standing, unwithered. Mehitabel dropped her hand, closed her eyes and relaxed. The followers waited with bowed heads.

And then it came to me, the reason for that expression of triumph.

Mehitabel was about to punish Rhiannon for her love of Jack, in the most horrible way imaginable. In my mind's eye I saw the old woman yesterday, gloating over Jack's tattered remains as we brought them in on the old blue tarpaulin, her greedy eyes taking in every particle of flesh, every splinter of bone, and committing them to memory...

Rhiannon hadn't been there. She hadn't seen it. But she was going to see it now.

Every last bit. That was the memory of Jack she would carry with her until she died. Not the days and nights of love, but the bloody remains.

"No! I shouted. "For God's sake, no!"

Heads turned and there was a chorus of 'Sssh!', but the silent performance on the plinth continued. I tried to force my way forward with some vague idea of dragging Rhiannon away from there.

Then I paused. Something odd was happening to Mehitabel. Her bony fists began to beat at the air and her legs thrashed violently, clattering against the wheelchair's footrest. The Borkan swayed on her shoulder, clinging. Her attendants stepped forward uncertainly. Mehitabel seemed to be trying to stand. She screamed, the sound drifting off on the summer air.

"She's having a seizure!" someone shouted. Mehitabel was rocking to and fro, half standing, punching at the air like a boxer. "Restrain her, one of you! She'll hurt herself!"

The attendants seized her arms, one on each side, and forced her back into a sitting position. She seemed to be trying to scream again, but could produce only a high, unearthly whistling. The helmeted audience watched in horror. This was not a normal part of the act. The whistling died away. Mehitabel's face was contorted into an unrecognisable expression, an immobile grimace without any human meaning. I felt the hairs rise on the back of my neck.

Rhiannon leaned across and stared closely at Mehitabel. I saw her eyes widen. She reached out and touched the old woman for a moment. There was a short silence, then people began to murmur anxiously. Rhiannon stood and took the Borkan into her arms. She turned to face the audience.

"All right," she said briefly. "You can stand up now, all of you. I'm afraid Mehitabel's memories of the past year are lost to us all. She's dead."

I was the one to close Mehitabel's eyes, roll her chair off the plinth and bring The Stars down to earth. The helmeted ones were wailing with sorrow and disappointment. I remember Tom the cameraman saying, "How the hell did I ever get myself into this? If ever there was a non-event, this is it. Even if the old girl had lived, it was hardly gripping theatre."

The doctor arrived and pronounced Mehitabel well and truly dead. Packing away his autopsometer he said, "Heart attack. It could have happened any time. She must have been well over a hundred."

Rhiannon told me, "The first part of the transfer process highlights Mehitabel's memories. Kind of brings them into the foreground and sharpens them up ready for transfer."

"You think something unexpected came up, and she couldn't take it?"

She said, "Something like the Double-Aitch."

"But she was used to that, surely? She was always threatening you with it."

"That doesn't mean she ever examined it in detail. It might have been hidden in amongst all those other memories during previous transfers. This time, it came up front and centre. Ironic, isn't it? The memory she held over my head might be the one that killed her."

And she began to laugh shakily, a human reaction from the horror of events.

Carioca said sharply, "I don't see anything *remotely* funny about this fiasco." She was lamenting her lost opportunity for getting onsceen. "You'd be well advised to go out and talk to your fans," she said, and I could detect the jealousy in her voice. "That tedious wailing is playing *havoc* with everybody's nerves."

"Good idea," said Rhiannon. She strode briskly to the door and flung it open. "Just shut up and listen to some sense for a change!" she

shouted to the mourners. "This is official. *Remember!* is finished. I am not going to clone myself, ever. All my memories will die with me." Shocked shouts of disbelief arose. "And I'm doing no lectures, discussion groups, gatherings, anything. From now on I'm going to try to live like a normal person and forget all the rubbish Mehitabel's stuffed my head with. I don't know how much of it I can trust, or how much is real and how much is just Mehitabel's interpretations. So I'm going to try damned hard to forget it all."

"But what about us?" somebody shouted.

"Take off those stupid helmets, count yourselves lucky you've only got your own memories to haunt you, and go home." As they shuffled about, looking at one another uncertainly and perhaps waiting for someone to make a plea, she shouted, "So bugger off, all of you! Just bugger off and leave me alone!"

Carioca glanced at me and her face cracked into a wry grin. "That's telling them," she said.

So ended the *Remember!* cult. I never did tell Rhiannon about the specific memory that Mehitabel had in store for her. Why bother? It would only have caused pain.

There was a postscript; there usually is. The following day Diane and I were sitting in the sun with her father, outside their tumbledown shack. One of these days the local Council is going to tell them that shack has to come down. They'll say it's a safety hazard, but what they'll really mean is: it's an eyesore.

I held the Borkan on my lap. The little fellow seemed very contented, its comical face raised to the sun. I'd been recounting the events of yesterday.

"Glad we've seen the last of those nutcases," Dan Westaway said with gloomy satisfaction. This was something. It takes a lot to please Dan.

"Any idea what the Double-Aitch was?" Diane asked me.

"Could be almost anything from the last few hundred years. Some tragedy or other, maybe personal, maybe not." I shuddered despite the warmth, remembering the time I witnessed a shuttle crash at Sentry Down a few years back. Bodies and their possessions scattered all over the spaceport. "That's the problem with memories. Some are more trouble than they're worth. Imagine remembering Hiroshima first-hand, generation after generation. Some history is best kept on hard drives. That's where the Double-Aitch should have been."

Then Diane murmured. "I wonder…"

"What?"

"What if there was no Double-Aitch!"

"How do you mean?"

"What if it was purely imaginary," she said. "What if there never was a Hideous Happening – not *that* hideous, anyway, and Mehitabel invented one as a weapon. She sounds like some kind of a control freak. Isn't it the kind of thing she might do?"

"Oh, yes. I'd have said so, if I hadn't seen the expression on her face just before she died. It was horror, pure and simple. She remembered something so dreadful that her heart gave out. It had to be the Double-Aitch, brought up bright and clear by the transfer process."

"We'll never know," said Diane. "Just as well, I suppose. Hey, look, up there. There's someone watching us. Up there, sitting on that rock."

"Bloody trespasser," Dan grumbled. "Tourist, I bet."

I looked up the hillside and my heart lurched. For an instant I thought it was Jack Pirelli come back from the dead. The same build, the same bright green shirt. Even sitting on the same rock.

And the sight triggered another vivid memory…

He rose, and scrambled down towards us. "Excuse me!" he called. "Is this the Westaway place?" Clearly the sight of Dan's hovel had put doubts in his mind. Then he caught sight of the Borkan on my lap. "Ah, yes," he said. Now I could see the logo on his shirt.

"You're from the Galactic Life Trust. I've been expecting you." I stood and handed him the Borkan. "Too bad about Jack Pirelli," I said awkwardly.

"We'll miss him. He was one of the good guys. I guess we'll be getting the results of the investigation in a few days. Not that it makes any difference," he said sadly. He tickled the Borkan behind its ears. "Looks like the little fellow's been well looked after."

"I have a slithe farm." *I understand otherworld creatures*, I might have added, *and Jack filled me in on a few points.*

We chatted for a while, then the GLC man left with the Borkan, climbing the hillside long-legged.

"I wish I'd seen more of that Borkan," said Diane. "I got a good feeling from him."

Well, she would, of course. Because Diane is another of the good guys. But Mehitabel, on the other hand…

My mind went back a couple of days, and I saw that other figure

sitting on the rock. And the broom fronds shaking as a terrified land shark beat a hasty retreat.

Jack had said, *Telepathy works both ways with the Borkan. It recognised the shark as an enemy, so it planted a flight response in its mind.*

The Borkan was sensitive to emotions, good and bad. Rhiannon and I had spent time with it, and it had relaxed in our company. We were the good guys. We were its friends.

And then the Borkan had been confronted with Mehitabel, who was full of hatred and intent on inflicting an appalling memory on Rhiannon. She was the enemy, about to attack.

So the Borkan struck first.

We'll never know just what horror it planted in Mehitabel's mind, but it was enough to make her want to run for her life. But she couldn't, because she was old and crippled and her attendants were restraining her. As she struggled violently, unable to escape from the unthinkable, her ancient heart gave up.

And set Rhiannon free. ●

About the Cover

This month's cover is by BSFA-Award winning artist Dominic Harman, and first appeared on FANTASTIC (Spring, 2001).

He comments: 'Something I wanted to try with this cover was a very bright and light look. I have seen a lot of space scenes and I wanted to try to achieve a more Hollywood-type lighting effect. With the spaceship design I wanted to go for a slick look evoking speed. The colour palette, with the pinks and oranges compliment the punch colour, green, very well. I had thought while designing the ship that the green parts of the ship could be a gel-like substance encasing the alien passengers while on long journeys.'

Cosmos Books (www.oivas.com/cosmos), part of the print-on-demand publisher Wildside Press, is in the process of releasing trade paperback editions of John Christopher's WRINKLE IN THE SKIN, THE LITTLE PEOPLE, THE POSSESSORS, THE YEAR OF THE COMET *and* THE 22ND CENTURY. *As well as these older works, there is a new volume collecting all his shorter fiction planned for July.*

This is the third and final part of a new novel about Virtual Reality in a European Union twenty years from now – an EU that is suffering from the strains of British nationalism. If you require the first two parts of this novel, please consult the ordering information on page two.

BAD DREAM
JOHN CHRISTOPHER

IX

Michael woke to a rattle of hailstones on his bedroom window. Outside the monastery's silhouette was harshly black against a sky dark with heavy cloud, rather than residual night. He recalled a television programme from when he was on the edge of his teens, a projection based on the old global warming hypothesis. It had fascinated him with the promise of hot summers and mild damp winters, of a sub-tropical Britain in which monkeys and parrots chattered and squeaked through jungly forests; only to alarm him later with a threat of oceans swollen by melting polar ice. The sea level, a speaker had said, would rise by anything up to two metres. He'd watched the programme here at Sheaf, half excited, half terrified by an image of the sea bursting through the dunes at Oxbow Sands, racing north across the Marsh to seize the town in that ancient embrace – turning it into an island again, with waves battering the foot of Cerdic's Cliff and tall-masted ships riding less than a cannon-shot away.

All that was as remote and unreal now as Tennyson's *Parliament of Man*, which had also fired his imagination in an otherwise deadly boring class on Victorian poets. A new ice age was back at the top of the prediction pops. Intellectual fashions apart, the hail, giving way

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now to beating rain, was real enough. It was some consolation that this was not an office day, and his first appointment, at Brighton General Hospital, not until the afternoon. Although he was later than usual, there was no sound of DD moving about. He was perceptibly slowing up, and sleeping longer.

His mind turned to a more recent and happier memory. Lucy, at this hour, would be asleep, with family photographs crowding her walls and yesterday's clothes scattered over chairs and dressing stool. How long before he could hope to see her again? Her notion of the political crisis subsiding fairly quickly seemed over-sanguine after the declaration of martial law. He told himself to hang on to optimism: darkest hour before the dawn, and all that. But this morning's dawn was dark by any standard.

He roused himself eventually and was on his way downstairs to make coffee when he caught a glimpse of white in the tray of the fax machine on the landing. He switched a light on to read it: the message was brief.

'Please cancel/postpone outside appointments. Your presence is required at the Ministry, 1200 noon.' It was signed simply: 'Helen Rackham'.

God damn her! was his first reaction – laying that on at such ridiculously short notice. If his appointment had been early, he would have been gone already. He wondered about ignoring it, then checked the transmission time on the fax. 2239: it had been lying there over nine hours. Something else which had been bothering him came into focus: it was missing the Ministry heading, any heading in fact. The originating line showed a number he didn't recognize, probably her home fax.

He had a scratch breakfast while organizing a more leisurely one for DD, and headed for the station. The late start, compounded by the usual vagaries of Southeast Rail, got him to the Ministry just after twelve fifteen. The doorman, a lanky laid-back Jamaican called Gilbert, emerged from the shadows where he had been enjoying his pre-lunch joint to intercept him as he headed for the lift.

"Oy there, Mr Frodsham. You wanted in the Eagle & Lamb." Michael looked at him in query. "Mizz Rackham said to tell you. They all there."

He found them in the snug, behind the main bar. They were sitting round an assortment of drinks at the battered Victorian table, with Helen presiding at the far end. It was an occasion so out of character

that it would have been no more of a surprise to see her handling a pint of bitter, but it was iced orange juice she put down as he approached.

"Michael, better late than not at all. That gives us a full complement. Grab a stool. Half of Adnam's?"

As though they were old drinking buddies – how had she known that? He took the drink the barman brought and raised it. Helen went on: "So we'll waste no more time. You may be surprised by this." Her gesture took in the pub interior with a mixture of explanation and contempt. "I wanted an unofficial word, and it seemed more appropriate than the board-room. Especially since—" she looked at her watch "—I've not been entitled to preside over anything in the Ministry for the past twenty-one minutes. My resignation from office was effective as of noon."

Michael did not join in the murmur of surprise, though he was startled. He would always have seen a dramatic resignation as on the cards should it further her career, but it was difficult to see what she could hope to gain in the present circumstances.

Ignoring the murmur, Helen said crisply: "I've appreciated the co-operation I've had from all of you over the past eighteen months, even if I've not always shown it. I feel you're entitled to a few words of explanation of whatever's going to be put out in this evening's news. Actually, not being a member of cabinet, I've not been much better informed than the rest of you on what's been happening at government level. Things have been kept close to the chest, for obvious reasons.

"Apart from being less than fully informed, I've been a bit short on general comprehension. Possibly my original nationality has had something to do with that. This European business has been developing over half a century – you've grown up with it, and into it. But when I first got here – from a background where my grand-parents never stopped talking about England as the home country and always watched the Queen making her Christmas address... late at night, and a hot night buzzing with bugs... even then, I had to come in through the aliens channel. I suppose no-one's more a foreigner than a time-traveller from the past.

"Maybe I was marrying the past when I married an Englishman. The marriage didn't work, but I stayed in love with the country. I was puzzled, mind you. I thought a lot of pretty good things had been lost, and a lot more were at risk. But I told myself an alien, even a friendly

alien, wasn't the best judge of that. I couldn't be expected to understand the European idea as it deserved to be understood."

She drained her orange juice. "I probably still don't. It could all be nostalgic sentimentality – I liked my grandparents better than my parents, and I loved those Christmas gatherings, despite the heat and the bugs. But when we reach the point of calling in foreign troops – beg pardon, fellow-Euro troops – to suppress a revolt which whether or not it's crackpot is most definitely indigenous – then I guess it's time this time-traveller checked out."

She flashed an unsmiling glance around the table. "Thank you for listening. No handshakes, no embraces. Carry on drinking. It's on my tab."

She headed briskly for the door. Peter Graveny signalled the barman.

"Large Scotch, in that case. Michael? You have to hand it to the lady for jumping to it. Result of all that kangaroo watching as a child, probably. My guess is she's packed and ready for the early Quantas flight to Sydney."

"You think she's going back to Australia?"

"What else? And why not? She'll have kept her passport, and it's a nice safe spot. Better than this one. There's a rumour civilian traffic through the Tunnel's been suspended. Keeping the lines clear for the military, I suppose."

On Friday evening, Michael had an optimistic shot at calling Washington. The newscasts had been reassuring, stressing prospects of an early return to normal. It was an optimism echoed in the High Street by an ex-Army colonel who lived in the Square, Sheaf's particular oasis of gentility. He said he'd heard controls were already being relaxed, including communications controls. The difference between the military mind and the civilian, he suggested, was taking the long view and keeping your finger off the panic button. Michael declined his suggestion of a pint in the Dragon, and watched him stride off cheerfully in that direction, his Dandy Dinmont regimentally alert at his heels.

For a few seconds in which he heard the double-bleep of the network taking his call, and subsequently a wait tone, Michael felt optimism might have paid off; but these were followed by the familiar dispiriting crackle and the screen message: 'Contact not made.'

DD was querulous at breakfast next morning, and later wandered

aimlessly through the house, apparently in no mood to be soothed by early baroque music. Michael asked if he felt like accompanying him to the cemetery, and was brusquely refused: he would be making that trip soon enough and, thank God, on a one-way ticket. Michael went alone, picking up an arrangement from the flower shop on the way. He could have cut flowers from the garden, but didn't feel like making the effort.

The day was sunny but bitterly cold, with a whistling wind from the north-east that encouraged him to step out. He wasn't sure which was the stranger feeling: that he had so recently walked this way with Anna, or that they never would again. In the paddock, the lambs that had momentarily cheered her were half-grown. Even if their hour of reckoning was imminent, all they knew right now was sunshine and green grass, and a fleece protecting them from the icy blast.

He laid flowers on both graves, noting the absence of a red and white wreath on Adam's. Sooter, also encountered the evening before, had mentioned it. The presence and regular renewal of the wreaths had been reported: the offending item had been removed and the Carolingians had organized a cemetery watch in the hope of apprehending the person responsible. They hadn't caught anyone so far, but the observation was continuing.

The chubby red face had pouted into a frown. "I'm afraid the most likely explanation is that our chap didn't take full precautions against being spotted. I'm looking into that."

"Or else you have a mole."

He took it seriously. "I'm checking on that, too. But at least we've put a stopper on that particular bit of subversion. I'm telling you about it, Michael, because of your link with the deceased. Must have been galling for you, things like that going on."

Michael's instinct was to reply that political use of a grave was as contemptible in the Carolingians as it had been with BA; it was an indication of how things had changed that he found the urge easy to control.

Sooter put a hand on his arm, and this time he felt the impress of his fingers. "Have you given any more thought to joining us?"

"I've been too busy to think of anything but work and family."

"You should make the effort. You might find it a help. It was a pity about that Benedict interview. People who really know you would never believe you might get mixed up with a criminal organization, but it's

best to be completely above suspicion. And I think I ought to warn you that membership of the Sodalitas may not always be an option. The bandwagon's beginning to roll, and once it's really underway climbing aboard may not be easy."

On his way back to the house, Michael thought about what he could put on the table for lunch. There had been grumbling about the monotony of a diet of bread and cheese and paté from DD, who despite an affectation of indifference to food had always had a more than warm regard for his stomach. Granny T. had been culpable in that, though her love of cooking had not been an adequate excuse for his assumption that indulging his appetite represented her highest form of self-expression. On one of DD's birthdays, Anna, an impudent fourteen-year old, had promised him a special surprise, blindfolded him, and led him to the kitchen, to show him where in fact it was. He had been puzzled, barely seeing the point of the joke.

Then, when Granny T. died, Anna had taken on the role, with equal diligence if not quite her scope. It was not a duty Michael felt himself capable of assuming, even if he had thought it proper to do so. DD, though, was an old man. He wondered about an omelette, with mushrooms perhaps. DD was fond of mushrooms, though he would undoubtedly complain about them being tinned.

Opening the front door, Michael heard his voice from the direction of the garden room, raised in cackling merriment. He speculated that this might be another staging-post on the road to senility – DD talked to himself a lot these days – then heard a second, quieter voice. He found DD in one of the bergère armchairs, leaning forward, hands clasped and elbows on knees, towards Hildy who was curled up on the sofa.

"Hildy," Michael greeted her, "a pleasure I didn't expect."

DD scowled at the interruption. Hildy rose and came to kiss him. "Mikey! Ought I to have warned you? Darling, so sorry. You know me, and how hopeless I am at planning anything."

"You mustn't sell yourself short. I think you organize things very well. It's me and DD who are getting slack. Can you make do with an omelette and a glass of wine for lunch?"

"Positive heaven, except I will not let you have the trouble, when I come with no warning. It is fixed. We have a table reserved at the Dragon, and I pay – no argument. They have renewed my contract and I am filthy rich."

"I'm not sure..."

DD interrupted angrily: "Let the ungracious sod stay here and eat his leathery omelette, Hildy. I'm coming, and I won't quibble about your picking up the bill. A granddaughter who's the loveliest girl I've seen in decades, and who offers to buy me lunch... I may not die happy, but this is a good moment on the run-in."

When they got back to the house, Hildy insisted on making coffee, having brought some with her from London. It was Viennese, and DD, who had been known to devastate dinner parties with denunciations of the obscenity of adding fig to a beverage he loved, praised it without stint. Hildy flirted with him and he reciprocated enthusiastically, more alert than Michael had seen him for weeks. But despite that, and the caffeine, he eventually began to nod, and Hildy cajoled him into letting her take him up for his rest.

"He is sweet," she commented when she came down. "So also is *Grossvater* Otto, but much duller."

"Less responsive?"

"Don't be so severe with me, Mikey. Even if I deserve it. No, it is not that. Sex is not the only excitement. When it has gone, there will be other things, I hope – to be still as *schlagfertig* as he is would be good."

"*Schlagfertig*?"

"Quick-witted. But when the translation is literal – ready to take a blow. And ready to give one also. God, I hate to see him mastered by tiredness. I hate old age more than anything. I hope I die before it comes to me. But I suppose everyone says that." She turned, in a whirl of skirt. "I will make more coffee. There is something we should talk about."

He wondered, while she was absent, what she might have in mind. He was sure of one thing – that he was not prepared to discuss Lucy with her – but he no longer felt raw and aggressive in her company. The more some things mattered, the less others did.

Hildy poured coffee, lacing her own thickly with double cream, her only dietary weakness. Stirring it in, she asked: "Dieter has told you, about Stern?"

"About him overdosing? Yes. I can't feel too much about that. It's not his fault Anna's dead, and I suppose an over-active conscience is better than none." He paused, wondering if she might take that as a

dig. "But I can't pretend I'm grieving. I didn't warm to the man."

She shrugged. "I scarcely knew him. He was at the Christmas party, of course. So was one of his assistants, Berthold Gegener."

Michael nodded. "Swooning at your feet. I remember. I saw him again at the Clinic, but only fleetingly."

"He's a nice boy. He wrote letters to me, after I came to London." She saw Michael's eye on her. "Nice letters. He is an innocent."

"And you wrote back. Also innocently, but with just a hint that there might be life beyond innocence. Real life."

Hildy smiled. "You think you know me, and perhaps you do a little bit. Better than Berthold, yes. But it is only a little bit, Mikey. Do not believe you know me truly."

"I don't fool myself about that. No-one knows anyone truly. As far as most are concerned, a pragmatic view is enough. No need to pursue things further, no urge."

A flicker of her eye took the point, and a quick smile denied resentment of it. "I had a letter yesterday from Berthold. He was shocked that Stern has killed himself. Not just shocked – he cannot understand it. He thought he knew Stern – as a friend, not just boss. He has been living with Stern and his family, in fact. And Stern has talked to him, since Anna died. Berthold had never known him like this – so dreadfully unhappy. He was experienced as a medical: he had lost patients before."

"Not many who were closely related to his principal sponsor, probably."

She was silent a moment. "Berthold thinks – he thinks Stern thought there was something wrong, at the Clinic."

"Wrong?" He felt a choking sensation, a stab of unreasonable fear. "In what way, wrong? To do with Anna's death?"

"Just wrong, he says. You understand, it is nothing Berthold himself knows, or suspects. The suspecting is about Stern's death, not Anna's."

"Have you spoken to Dieter about it?"

She hesitated. "No."

"Why not?"

"I did not want to trouble him. With the supposings of a young man. Dieter is busy always. Also…"

"What?"

"Dieter is his sponsor, too – his employer. Berthold has written to me, in confidence, because he is worried. If I tell Dieter and it is only

his foolishness, he may get into trouble. You must not think me unfair in everything."

"You're telling me, though."

"Because it concerns Anna. She was my sister, also. When I was little… she might have hated me because I was your father's child, but it was not so. Even after Adam came, she gave me the love she could spare."

"Yes, I know she did that."

"And Dieter can be touchy, about the company. He seems as though he stands high above all problems, but these things are of great importance to him – more important than anything in the world. He has created the business, from the beginning, and made it big."

Michael shrugged. "You know him better than I do."

The initial panic anxiety had subsided. Berthold was very young, possibly unbalanced. His calf-like devotion to Hildy had most likely been mirrored in his attachment to Stern. Hero-worshipping the older man could, on Stern's death, have triggered an emotional crisis in him. It didn't have to have a rational basis.

It was Stern who had fed Berthold the idea of there being 'something wrong' at the Clinic. He could only have referred to a technical failure or an error in clinical procedure, something which should not have happened, or had been done badly. Any responsibility for such shortcoming was ultimately Stern's; and it looked as though he had accepted it, and passed sentence on himself. Digging him up to echo it would serve no purpose for anyone.

A similar, irredeemable finality applied to Anna's death. No amount of probing or condemnation would bring her back. But in her case there was at least the consolation of knowing that she had died persuaded she had recovered her lost love. It was a serenity not one in a million was likely to know. More through her strength than his own, he could believe now that he and Lucy might eventually share a life, perhaps a long one; but even if that came about, it would one day fall to her to close his eyes, or him hers.

He said: "There's not a lot one can do, is there, since you don't want to bring in Dieter? Nothing that would help anyone."

"It might help Berthold if we talk with him."

"We?"

"I will be happier if you are with me." She smiled, without guile. "My big brother."

"*Stiefbruder.*"

"Yes. Even so."

He wondered if it was as simple as that, or could be. Her humiliation of him smarted less, but forgetting it, or what it had told him about her, was another matter. Yet he did not have to trust her, and whatever her motivation, there was no point in getting involved, even as far as arguing.

He said: "If you think it will do any good."

"So – when?"

"I've a lot on my plate at the moment. And I'm sure you have commitments."

"None that I cannot break."

"OK." He drank his coffee and stood up. "I'll see what I can work out, and let you know."

Peter Graveny called Michael on Monday morning from his car. He had his carphone bracketed on the dashboard: even when interference wasn't breaking up the image it bobbed up and down, inducing nausea.

"Still at home, then? Thank God there are some of us who take our responsibilities seriously. What would the hospital service be like if everyone skived off? Better not answer that, come to think of it."

"I'm picking up an appointment I lost when Helen summoned us in for the short goodbye. A woman called Wright, and her rights are something she stands on heavily. I made a suitably crawling apology, but there can be no excuse for letting her down. Last time it had to be afternoon; now it's eleven forty-five precisely. Buggers up the day, but I gather that's the idea."

"She probably fancies you."

"That would be daunting, if true. She's close on two metres tall, and built to match."

"That'll be it, then. She needs a scrum-half for a quick touch-down. I was wondering when you were likely to be up in the Smoke next." Graveny had a fund of out-dated colloquialisms. He frequently spoke of people as 'bods', an expression Michael had only otherwise heard as a boy, on the lips of a deeply wrinkled RAF officer left over from World War 2.

"Wednesday, probably."

"Good. Keep lunch open. My grapevine has yielded some bonzer gen. How are you with lamb?"

"I like it. And half a minute's walk to Cerdic's Cliff gives me a view of several acres of the animal, on the hoof. Marsh lamb."

"It's not bad, either. But I'm talking something special – something from outside, and not brought in through Customs either."

"If you're saying New Zealand..."

"I'm not. I'm saying Icelandic. But I'm not saying it twice, and I hope you won't repeat it. The patron owes me a favour, which I reckon will stretch to a second portion for an old buddy."

Icelandic lamb, always of high repute, had acquired an otherworldly snob esteem since Iceland, in response to prolonged political and economic pressure from the Federation, had responded defiantly through a trade arrangement with the United States which included an American defence guarantee. So its lamb was not just a prohibited import, but one from near-hostile territory. Never cheap, its ounce-for-ounce price had risen to eclipse that of caviar. Michael asked: "Can you afford it, on our kind of salary?"

"As I said, a favour owed. Are you on?"

"They might get raided. Yes, what the hell – I'm on. Any news of Helen, by the way? I suppose it's too early for a postcard of the Opera House."

"Not a word. What does seem odd is that they still haven't named a successor."

"The PM is probably too busy sorting out his backbenchers. That anti-Federal fracas in the House on Friday must have bothered him."

"Maybe he's running short of pliable shits. It's a hard world. I've got the underpass coming up, so I'd better break off before I break up." On the screen he was breaking up already. "Wednesday, from the office, twelve thirty. I won't say where we're going, in case Customs descend on you with thumbscrews."

The doorbell rang as he was coming away from the console. The postie, a gnarled and more than slightly nutty woman in her late sixties who had somehow defied compulsory retirement, glared up the steps, holding out a package. Her peaked cap dripped rain on a small sharp nose. He thanked her, and reached for the package.

"It's all wrong," she said. "Federal regulations says a house got to have a letter box measuring thirty by eight centimetres minimum, or else an outside box with an aperture of the same dimensions."

It was a point she had raised before, and he answered it as patiently. "That's true. It's also true that houses granted historic status at the date

the regulation was brought in are exempt. And all the buildings inside the citadel of Sheaf have that exemption, including this one."

"Bloody citadel," she said. "Bloody Sheaf. Burning it down was the only good idea the bloody French ever had."

She thrust the package at him and stumped away across the courtyard, splashing through puddles. Michael looked at what he'd been given. It was addressed in block-capitals in an unfamiliar hand. There had been reports of cranks to the right of BA reviving that other old terrorist custom, the letter bomb, but there was no reason to think he was a likely target. The date-stamp was Paris, which made the threat even more improbable. He closed the door and tore open the wrapping.

Inside was a DVD; he checked the envelope again but found no covering letter. In the sitting room above him, the wall-clock chimed a half-hour: nine thirty. He needed to allow an hour and three-quarters for Brighton, the roads being what they were, and there might be difficulties with the hospital car-park. He didn't relish the thought of arriving even a few minutes later than the time appointed by Sonia Wright. But his curiosity had been roused. He went to the book room, to the muffled accompaniment of Gluck from DD's study, and slipped the disc into the machine. That would be sufficient to establish what it was: watching it could wait till he got back.

Lucy burst smiling onto the screen. "Love laughs at mail censors as well as locksmiths. Leastways, I hope and trust it does. I won't go into ways and means, but if a black lady weighing one hundred and thirty-five pounds can slip through the mesh, I reckon something this size ought to have a good chance."

He gazed at her image hungrily. She was wearing a dress he hadn't seen before, of silvery material. She ran her hands down, from neck to thigh.

"How's that for honesty? Some girls may get peaky from love-sickness, but I fill out: three pounds extra since I saw you last. Doesn't mean I don't miss you – doesn't mean I don't worry over you. And it certainly doesn't mean I'm giving up on hauling you over here. I mean to have you. I'm not saying a true Brit like you is going to enjoy turning Yank – not right away, at least – but concentrate on the fringe benefits. And you get to keep your racial identity. You don't have to turn black as well."

She rattled on, not inhibited by the camera but not playing to it, as Hildy would have done. She talked easily, about everyday things: a meal

she had had with an old girlfriend, her cat Luther. Later, after a fractional pause, she was more serious.

"I don't think I told you my maternal grandpop was an evangelist. Took the Baptist word all over Alabama, Georgia and Mississip. He had biceps like a steel-worker; when he put the believers under the water they knew for certain they were in the power of the Lord. He converted folks by the score, hundred, thousand probably, to something they had no notion of taking up when they went into his tent. I've never seen myself as wanting that kind of power – to change people's way of looking, make them see things my way. And I still don't, with people that don't matter – strangers. OK, I work in politics and I'm professional at my job, but it's not serious with me. If Isak doesn't get back into the White House, I'll be disappointed, sure, but I'm not going to weep and tear my hair. I won't lose sleep.

"I guess I stand back some, and that even goes for family, much as I love 'em. Brother Joshua's got himself in deep shit lately, with a girl in his partnership. It's going to be a messy divorce. Momma and Poppa are fighting alongside his wife, Tildy. So's my sister. She's sworn she won't speak to Josh again if he goes through with it. She probably means that: we're a strong-minded bunch. I'm not saying I'm neutral – I like Tildy, and the kids, and the girl's high-yaller with the sort of pretty that won't last – but I'm striking no attitudes. It'll sort itself out with no help from me. Or not, as the case may be.

"One reason is, I remember my grandpop got himself into the same sort of trouble, in his day. Baptized this sweet kid who was on vacation from New York, and couldn't stop himself giving her a little post-baptismal attention. She got pregnant, and he had to give up the ministry. They went back to NY, he worked as a street cleaner, and my mother got born. It worked out, the way things do.

"But you and me is something I'm not prepared to leave fate to work out, not while I can do a little working out myself. I want us to be together, and in a place where it's reasonably safe – safe as anywhere can be in a mayhem and murder world – safe for us and those three, four Anglo-piccaninns. The business I'm in, you get to know how things can be fixed, and get to know the fixers and the friends of the fixers. All you have to do is get your honky hunk to the US Embassy in Paris, and I guarantee the rest will follow.

"Yeah, I know about DD, and you're right, he wouldn't transplant here. But you worry too much about him. Sure, he's old, but he's not

as dependent on you as you think. Within twenty-four hours of your leaving, the Frods-Hams will whisk him over to Frohsteig, where he'll have his son, and that sexy granddaughter, and *Grossvater* Otto to reminisce with. They can put schnapps in their beer, and sing along to 'Lili Marlene'.

"What matters is relationships, living relationships not dead ones. DD had his with Granny T. – a great one from what you tell me. All he's doing now is passing time in the waiting room. He doesn't really give a damn about you – sorry if that stings, but it's true. Not you, not anyone – even Hildy's no more than wallpaper in a room he's set to leave. But we do have something going, honey love, and it's worth fighting for. And you ain't a real fighter if you ain't willing to be ruthless to win.

"So what's keeping you? I won't give you a name at the Embassy: mine will be enough. All we have against us is time, and he, believe me, is the most ruthless fighter in the business. Those rumours... I still can't spell them out, and it wouldn't help if I did. If you won't come when I call you, I guess threats won't make you. But believe me, that fighter is not on our side, and he shortens by the minute."

She pursed her lips into a kiss. "Even in this. Take my love, honey, and bring it back to me. Soon."

DD intercepted Michael on his way out, displaying a two-day stubble of beard. He claimed his hand shook too badly even for a protector razor, and flatly refused to use the cordless electric Michael had bought for him. It didn't give a clean shave, he said, caressing his stubble. He asked what they were having for supper, and Michael told him Mrs Featherstone from Lookout Street would be bringing something down. DD exploded.

"Mrs fucking Featherstone! That means either hotpot with gristle, or fish-pie with skin and bones. I can't stand the woman, and I certainly can't stand the sweet-charity smile that comes with the delivery. The birds can have it, whatever it is. I'll manage with bread and cheese."

"I'll get something from Brighton Marks & Spencer, if I have time."

"I'm not blaming you," DD said fretfully, "but I get fed up with all this. I ran across Beau Chambers in the High Street yesterday. Four-course meals in that residential place he's in, and a decent drop of wine with it, he says. He's put on half a stone. He said they might have a vacancy coming up."

Over the next few days, Michael played Lucy's disc several times, and thought about it in between. The frank assurance of her demand exhilarated him; he was delighted when his own half-framed arguments and excuses collapsed before her cogency and his need. Occasionally he turned on the television. Newscasts were preoccupied with debates in the House of Commons in which some backbenchers bleated ineffectually about loss of sovereignty, while government and opposition front benches united in a show of uneasy reassurance. It was pathetic in its pointlessness.

There was nothing left to win here, he told himself, everything to lose. Graveny, as they were discreetly admitted through a green baize door, was equally dismissive of immediate prospects.

"The trouble is, we like our fetters. Nice solid clank when you wave your arms. And those ankle-chains keep you shuffling on at a steady pace. Who wants to break into a run, anyway?"

The restaurant was anonymous, though the PC-printed menu called it Luke's. It fell into a recognizable category, between official de luxe establishments and the increasing number catering for the increasingly penurious, where for lamb you could confidently read goat. Places like Luke's were ex-directory, word-of-mouth, and cash-only. But lamb was positively lamb, and in this case, as Graveny had promised, lusciously Icelandic. They also served cloud-berries, from the same forbidden island, as a pudding. The wine was French though, a vintage Nuits St Georges, and very good.

Afterwards they had coffee and brandy in an atmosphere wickedly tinged with cigar smoke. It was, all in all, a pleasant oasis in a rapidly spreading desert. There was no reason to presume such oases would not survive, Michael thought, and tried to convince himself it mattered.

They emerged into the cloudy chill of a dingy street, to the cries of rival newsboys. One had a stack of Standards, the other of the London Evening Post, Euro-funded to compete with its politically less reliable rival. Both boys were shrieking "Sensation!" but while the Standard headline simply read GOVERNMENT FALLS, the Post's, in heavier type, cried TREACHERY!

Graveny bought a Standard, and they scanned it together. An early morning meeting of the cabinet had ended in revolt, and the resignation of the Prime Minister. The new government, under the interim control of Joseph Wills-Parson, Minister for Defence, had issued an emergency order withdrawing the United Kingdom from the European

Union. All powers and authority that had been conveyed to Europe, from the Single European Act onwards, were consequently rescinded, and re-invested in Parliament, the sole source and repository of British sovereignty.

"Well, I'm buggered!" Graveny marvelled, "Unbelievable! Somebody's done something."

Michael pointed to a smaller story in the bottom right-hand corner. It was an account of new ministerial appointments. The list included Helen Rackham, as Home Secretary.

"Haven't they just?"

X

It was dark by the time Michael got to Sheaf. There had been chaos at Charing Cross and he had waited two hours for a train. Rumours were rife: in the milling crowd he heard that Irish troops had occupied Anglesey, that there had been a threat to bomb London, that a special train had taken the royal family to the comparative safety of Scotland. That everything emanating from the bland television screen above the station buffet oozed reassurance did nothing to reduce speculation.

There were several unscheduled stops on the way down, one lasting over half an hour, and carriage and corridor were so crowded that it was better to endure the discomfort of a distended bladder than to try to force a way to the lavatory. When they finally reached Ashford, there was an announcement that service would terminate there: trains to stations further south were cancelled until further notice. The link to Sheaf was still operating but almost as crowded as the main-line train had been; it appeared that some people were taking any route out rather than stay in what they saw as a possible target area.

The phone network was out of action, so there was no point attempting to get through to DD. Michael doubted that DD, isolated in his music, would worry about his absence, but he needed to be fed and no replacement for Mrs Featherstone had yet been found. It was a relief when the train pulled in at the station, an even greater relief to find the town relatively deserted and wrapped in its customary evening stillness.

He opened the front door to the further reassurance of a haunting little *air de ballet* by Gretry, which DD had lately become obsessed with. The worry about food, it emerged, had been unnecessary: DD

had found cheese and ham in the fridge and somehow concocted his private version of a *croque monsieur*, and had brought up a bottle of claret from the cellar to wash it down. It stood, barely a quarter full, beside the debris in the kitchen. DD had heard the official news from London, but was not much interested. His principal topic was another encounter with his old pal from the nursing home, who had been offering the delights of bridge as a further inducement.

"But you don't play bridge," Michael said.

"Used to, when I was in the Army. They're short of a fourth, he said, since that old cow Tillie Smythe popped her clogs. I'm off to bed."

Michael made a sandwich with what was left of the cheese and ate it in front of the television set. The late-night News had finally found something of substance to report. The French guards at Folkestone had defied orders to stand down, and had taken over control of the Tunnel entrance. A protest had been lodged with Brussels, and steps were being taken to rectify the situation.

After a night of fitful sleep, he woke to a distant throb of engines in the southern sky. He went to the window, though without much expectation of seeing anything: lodged as it was halfway up Friars Hill, the house's view was impressive to the north but southwards was limited by the stand of leylandii blocking off the High Street, and by the monastery's pointed roof. Between those two impediments there was only a narrow gap of powder-blue sky, but by chance it was along that channel they emerged: heavy military planes.

The first line was followed by a second, and he heard but could not see others crossing the town. The English Channel lay only a couple of miles south, which meant they must be coming from France. It was a few minutes to the hour, and he switched on his bedside radio. Janice always left it tuned to her favourite station, and he was anticipating having to switch over from a blare of pop music, but a public service announcement was in progress: "...take no action and as far as possible remain indoors. Only officially badged vehicles are permitted on motorways, and cars using other roads must carry an authorization, obtainable from local police stations, which will not be issued except in cases establishing an urgent need to travel. We repeat: the government has declared a state of emergency. Stay tuned for further announcements."

When the news came on, the main item was an overnight statement from Downing Street. In view of the continuing rejection by French

troops of orders to evacuate their bridgehead at Folkestone, and the refusal by the European High Commission either to confirm or deny reports that additional troops had been sent through the Tunnel to reinforce this illegal occupation, the British representative at the United Nations had called for an emergency meeting of the Security Council. In addition, the Prime Minister had made a direct appeal to the President of the United States.

The announcer's voice gave way to that of Wills-Parson. He sounded tired.

"We have to assume that other members of the Federation with seats at the United Nations may attempt to block our assertion of national independence, on the grounds that the issue is an internal Federation concern. Meanwhile, this country is under threat of imminent invasion by Federal forces. For that reason, I have requested the President to give us all help possible in our struggle, including military help. Twice in the last century the Americans came to the aid of liberty in Europe. The threat today is at least as great as it was in 1917 and 1941."

The sound of aircraft, fading away in the north, was suddenly lost in a wild jangle of bells from St Anselm's Norman tower. Moments later, Michael found DD at the door in his pyjama tops – he refused to wear the trousers. "So it's on then!"

"On?"

"The invasion. That was what they told us in the Battle of Britain, in 1940. Church bells would mean the Germans had landed. They didn't manage it then, but the buggers don't give up, do they?"

The old man's mad certainty put Michael's own bewilderment in perspective. He said: "It's not the same, DD. There's nothing to get worried about."

"They never give up," DD repeated. "My dad and I were both in the LDV, before they called it the Home Guard. Patrolled together outside the Post Office in Winchester, kid of sixteen and a bald old sod left over from the first war. God knows why the Post Office: nobody said. With one rifle between us – he let me have that, and the two rounds of ammo, and he carried a pike. Bloody Germans – never give up."

He was beginning to shiver in the morning's chill. Michael took his arm. "Let's get your dressing gown on, and I'll make us a mug of tea."

Sheaf was well provided with bakers, tourists offering a year-round market for rolls and sandwiches and sticky cakes, and there were two in the High Street. At each of them, just before nine o'clock, a queue stretched more than twenty metres from the door. Michael thought the shop at the top of Bear Street, more out of the way, might be a better prospect, but the queue there was almost as long. He joined it, anyway. A notice in the window read: TWO LOAVES MAX PER PERSON.

A woman ahead of him was explaining about the early morning carillon. Graham Welby, a sidesmen at the church whose eccentricity was sometimes indistinguishable from nuttiness, had apparently taken it on himself to revive the ancient alarm signal, and the Rector had been forced to rise from his bed to put a stop to it. There was a pleasantly comic element to this: the Rector had not long since taken as a bride a comely young woman who had come to Sheaf as his curate, and popular report held that he had been in a swoon of sexual ecstasy ever since.

The atmosphere among the queuers was generally one more of curiosity than alarm. He heard some anti-Euro sentiments voiced, but they were matched by others suggesting Wills-Parson had put himself out on a limb which would not bear him for long. There seemed to be general agreement that the call for American intervention was as crackpot as Welby's little fling with the bells. But there was no great sense of indignation. There was some speculation as to where the aircraft had been heading, but the principal conclusion was that, whatever their destination, it was bound to be a long way from Sheaf.

Re-entering the house through the garden, Michael noted that the magnolia had shed most of its remaining yellow-stained blossoms, but the azaleas were still burning brightly and the roses were pregnant with bud, some already in flower. On his way to the kitchen to put away the loaves, his eye was caught, through the hall window, by another unexpected flash of colour. He set the bread down on the painted chest, and went to investigate.

The car parked beside his own soberly blue Rover was a Citroen, in the flaming pink metallic paint which, together with bright green hub-caps, had been a feature of last year's range re-launch. Additionally, it was bedizened with eye-wrenching panels of white, boldly lettered in pillar-box red. The most prominent, taking up almost the whole of the nearside front door panel, proclaimed SODALITAS CAROLINGIANA,

which closer inspection revealed to be repeated on the offside. The bonnet carried a similarly blatant message: PRESIDENT – SHEAF CIRCLE. There were also a couple of large stickers EUROPE IS THE FUTURE and FORWARD WITH THE CAROLINGIANS! Their badge, a ring of big blue stars firmly enclosing a miniature Union flag, was featured at the top of both front and rear windscreens.

Michael was still studying the display when Sooter came into the courtyard. His appearance had been transformed by a royal blue jacket with the Carolingian badge on the breast pocket, and a gold-braided peaked cap.

He looked purposefully at Michael. "You're back. Good. I wanted to have a word. I tried your bell, but there was no reply."

Michael nodded. "I've been getting some bread in."

Sooter looked cross. "There's been hoarding."

"I wouldn't call two loaves a hoard."

"Not by you, necessarily. Anyway, we're getting the situation under control. I need to talk to you about parking."

Michael hesitated before responding. Those privileged to enjoy parking space inside the citadel defended it with paranoid intensity: favours granted on a temporary basis were not always easy to retrieve. Apart from the garage adjacent to his shoebox house on Sheaf Hill, Sooter had some parking near his office which needed to be juggled between partners and special clients. Presumably whatever game he was playing with his Carolingians required, or made him think he required, a supplement to that. And the Georgian House courtyard was certainly under-used these days.

He said, warily: "We could let you use part of this. But if we get an influx of family…"

Sooter produced a legal-length document from inside his jacket. It looked like a product of his office printer, though the heading was not the familiar Barnes, Dickson & Turnbull, but Sodalitas Carolingiana.

"I'll leave this with you. Putting it briefly, this courtyard has been requisitioned as a car park by the Carolingian administration in Sheaf."

"The what?"

Earnestly, Sooter explained: "This is an emergency matter, and the emergency probably won't last long. Meanwhile I'm unofficially authorizing you to keep your own car here, at least for the present. If you have any problem with junior officials, refer them to me. We're working out of the Town Hall, incidentally."

Michael wondered if, in a variant of Welby's campanological fit, the man had gone mad: the uniform and the Technicolor car, with its messages and stickers and badges, hinted at it.

"Junior officials...? Did you say Carolingian administration in Sheaf?" Sooter nodded agreement. "What does that mean, precisely?"

Sooter brought his hands together, not quite rubbing them but with a positive squeeze of pleasure. "Exactly what it says. I gather you missed the announcement. The Sodalitas has taken over local administration not – just here, but throughout the country."

Mad or not, caution seemed indicated. Michael asked mildly: "On whose authority would that be? The government's?"

"If you're referring to that treacherous lunatic, Wills-Parson, certainly not. Our authority is directly from the Federal High Commission." He advanced and put a hand on Michael's arm. "The trouble with people like you, Michael, is that you go with the tide. I suppose you can put up some sort of case for that, a selfish one, as long as you can be sure you know the way the tide will run. All this Little England stuff that's made the headlines over the past year... serious people understood that even though it was ridiculous it had to be taken seriously, to make sure it stayed ridiculous. Now the tide's on the turn, but we needed to be ready in advance, ready to take advantage of it.

"Right now the main function of the Sodalitas is as an arm of the Federation, defending it against subversion. That's very important, but there's more to it than that, Michael, much more. Once we've put things to rights here, we shall move on to revolutionize Europe as a whole. We're not going with a tide – we're creating one."

Gait, Michael reflected, watching Sooter's departure up Friars Hill, was always a give-away: he might parade like a peacock but he walked like a budgerigar. Back in the house, he switched on the television but left it while he saw to things, like plant watering, which Janice could never remember to do. Anna, at least, had missed all this. He wasn't sure whether the play in progress was tragedy or farce, but if it had happened six months ago she would have been frantic over the risk it entailed for Adam. For both of them it was peace now, all risks ended.

He got back to the book room to find a news broadcast on. The face of the announcer was unfamiliar, but he had a jacket like Sooter's. He was reiterating Sooter's statement, that civil and military authority throughout the United Kingdom had been assumed by the Federal High

Commissioner in London, acting for the European High Commission. Order was being re-established, and for the time being would be locally administered by the appropriate branches of the Sodalitas Carolingiana. Parliament had been suspended, and the former Prime Minister, Joseph Wills-Parson, placed under arrest in protective custody.

That was that, then. He wondered what he could give DD for lunch.

That afternoon, while DD napped, Michael sampled television and radio. Everything seemed back to normal. Television offered soccer, a quiz show, a true-life drama and a sit-com re-run, with news bulletins that were uninformative but unalarming. The same atmosphere prevailed on radio, though he did find one station jammed into unintelligibility. He tried calling Lucy but got no joy: the network must be down still.

The town, when he went up on a quick shopping trip, also seemed normal, and there were no queues at the bread shops. He saw blue-jacketed Carolingians, but even with Heckler-Kochs they did not present a particularly disturbing feature – more like a tawdry spectacle laid on for tourists; like the Town Crier in his scarlet waistcoat, or the Morris dancers with their staves and furbelows. St Anselm's clock struck the hour, shortly followed by the distant chug of the Sheaf Flyer pulling out of the station. Sheaf was at peace.

He got back, though, to find DD up, and in some agitation. He was in the hall, talking to a lad in his teens, a Carolingian who seemed partly belligerent, partly overawed by the encounter.

DD said: "It's some bloody nonsense about wanting me to report to some Commandant. That's the Germans again, isn't it?"

The boy looked at Michael with relief. "Mr Frodsham, sir? It's you the Commandant wants."

"The Commandant – that will be Mr Sooter?" The boy nodded. "Did he say what he wants me for?"

"No, sir. Just you're to report to him, at the Town Hall."

"I see. Thanks for letting me know."

"Now, sir. I'm to bring you, right away."

The belligerence was verging on desperation; he seemed near weeping.

"Bloody Germans!" DD said. "I'll come with you."

"No. Go and listen to them instead: Bach, Buxtehude... It won't be anything important, car parking probably."

"Something to do with that tart's wagon sitting outside our front door? I'll come with you. I want the nauseating thing gone."

Michael succeeded in soothing him and sending him grumbling upstairs before accompanying the boy up the hill. He doubted his own interpretation of the summons, and wondered what actually lay behind it. The possibility that Adam's BA connection might, under present circumstances, have come up for re-investigation was a mildly disturbing one. He told himself he had been personally cleared by Security, but security services, as he well knew, were many-headed beasts.

It might, on the other hand, be something as simple as Sooter inventing a reason for getting him along just to observe him revelling in the joy of his office and his new peaked cap. His reception tended to support that. Sooter wasn't wearing the cap, but it was carelessly conspicuous on the edge of the Mayor's desk, behind which he sat hunched in a Victorian swivel-chair. There was a map of England on the wall, studded cryptically with coloured pins, and an impressive-looking intercom system beside the desk. At a suitably respectful distance from the great man, a blue-jacketed male secretary sat in front of keyboard and plasma-screen.

Sooter was busy with a telephone call; he nodded acknowledgement of Michael's arrival and carried on. It seemed to be a jurisdictional problem: the village of Nutarge, ten miles away, came under Sheaf in Sooter's view but had been claimed by Ashford. Since Ashford was a much more important centre, one would expect the Commandant there to carry more clout, and Michael could not help being impressed by the firm, indeed truculent manner in which Sooter fought his corner. He ended his conversation abruptly with the comment that he had sent a detachment to set up a command post in the Nutarge Village Hall, and had reported to London to that effect. Turning to Michael, he said: "Teething troubles. Like the phone network: they say it's coming back on soon, but soon may not be today, or even tomorrow. Meanwhile, it's back to the old land line. That's why I had you paged. You're wanted, from Germany. I can get you through from here." He clicked fingers at the secretary. "Get the Frohsteig number for Mr Frodsham."

The call came through surprisingly quickly. Within minutes Michael was handed the telephone. It was Dieter at the other end.

"Michael? You are all right?"

Sooter was studying a map, under a transparent plastic cover decorated with coloured lines and stars and arrows. Michael said: "Yes. We're both fine. Things are pretty quiet down here."

"Good." Dieter hesitated. Without a screen one missed the subtleties of facial expression, but nuances of voice became more obvious. Not good news, Michael felt. "Your father…"

"What about him – what's happened?"

"I am sure it will not be serious. A heart attack. He is being well cared for, I assure you."

"Has he been hospitalized?"

"Indeed, yes. In Nuremberg we have the best cardiac unit in Germany."

"When did he have it, the attack?"

"It was in the night. I have tried to make contact sooner, but the way things have been… But I have spoken with his physician in the last hour. His condition is stable."

"Is he conscious?"

"No, but that is because they prescribe total sedation – on support, you understand. But you will wish to come, of course."

He felt a tightness in his own chest. "If I possibly can."

"I am sure it is possible. It is fortunate Sheaf is in the occupied territory. Yet not a good idea for DD, perhaps."

"No. I think not."

"I spoke with Commandant Sooter, earlier. It is better I speak with him again. I believe he will help."

Sooter was in fact extremely helpful. Michael heard him tell Dieter that Mr Frodsham's journey would be given top priority, and every facility that might be required. When they had finished, he turned to Michael: "How long will you need to pack?"

"Half an hour. But I'll have to make arrangements for my grandfather."

"Leave that to me."

"He'd been thinking of trying out Mrs Bennett's Sunnyhill; but I'm not sure whether they have a vacancy, or if they could take him at such short notice."

"I said: leave it to me. I'll deal with Mrs Bennett." He checked the time. "A car will come round for you at seventeen thirty."

Something had been nagging in his mind. "Dieter – my uncle – said something about it being fortunate Sheaf was in occupied territory.

His English isn't perfect, but it's pretty good. It seemed an odd way of putting things."

The glow of command in Sooter's face took on a more characteristically peevish aspect. He said, after a pause: "There's a bit of trouble still, in the north."

"What sort of trouble?"

"Resistance. It's meaningless, pointless. And illegitimate, of course. Quite apart from sovereignty of all former national states being vested in the Federation, a bauble doesn't justify anything. The woman's mad."

"Woman?"

"Rackham. She got away when Wills-Parson was pulled in, and took the Mace with her."

Johann met him at Nuremberg station. Another cold snap had set in, and the scar on his right cheek was bright, raw looking. He pulled Michael into an embrace.

"How is he?" Michael asked.

"Fine." Michael freed himself to look into his step-brother's eyes; they were direct as ever. "No, really fine. As well as anyone can be who's had a massive heart attack. He's stable, and the prognosis is excellent."

Heinrich had the stretch Mercedes immediately outside, taking up two places in a crowded taxi rank. As they purred away, Johann said: "You've made good time."

"It went very smoothly. Dieter's is a name to conjure with."

Johann laughed. "He has his uses! You'll be getting accustomed to that train journey. Just as well you didn't try to make a plane. They say Heathrow's re-opening, but God knows when. How's DD?"

"Delighted with life. Dieter's man in Sheaf got him fixed up in a nursing home where he has pals. I said I had to go to London for a few days, but I don't think he was listening. I didn't say anything about Father."

"I'm glad. Adam, Anna... now this. It's been a fairly bloody year."

"Yes, it has. You say Heathrow's still closed? So things haven't settled down yet. Exactly what is happening? Someone on the train was talking about an American landing, but that's obviously just another idiot rumour."

"I'm afraid not."

"You're not saying they responded to Wills-Parson's appeal? But they couldn't – there wasn't time. He wasn't in office much more than twenty-four hours."

"Basically, it's a cock-up. You know they've had that aircraft carrier, the *Richard Nixon*, sitting off the west coast of Ireland? Aronheimer used it to send in a detachment of marines. He said it was simply to protect United States citizens at the American University in Liverpool. There'd been fighting in that area and he wanted to evacuate them. But the British Liberation Army put out a claim that the operation was in support of their revolt against the Federation.

"It's difficult to work out just what happened. Federal airborne troops had been sent north to deal with the Liverpool situation. There's a story that the Americans picked up their people, and were then prevented from getting away by the BLA. Whether or not that's true, they somehow got into a scrap with our lot. There were casualties, on both sides. As things stand, the Americans are surrounded, inside the University grounds. The situation's highly tricky, as you can imagine."

"Yes, I can imagine."

He thought of Lucy. This wasn't anything she could have been involved in, or even known about in advance; but the repercussions were bound to affect her, affect them both. If it led to war... But he couldn't believe that. The whole business was too absurd...

Johann's mind had been working along the same lines. He said: "I wouldn't worry about it. No-one is looking for trouble. We certainly don't want it, with the British situation still needing to be cleared up. And I'm sure the Americans will be aiming for a way out of a mess they never wanted to get into in the first place."

The Mercedes entered the ornamental gates of the Ost-Bavarisches Hospital and passed three *Parken Strengst Verboten* signs before depositing them at the front door. As they got out, Michael wryly compared the building's magnificence with the hospitals he was used to in England. The contrast was further underlined as a soaring walkway took them through space to the coronary care unit. Even the nurses' uniforms were better, he thought, or at least more impressively starched.

The figure in the bed, connected to drip and monitoring equipment, was motionless. Someone rose from the chair beside the bed as they came in. His surprise at seeing her surprised him; of course she would be here, she was his father's child too, and a closer one. Hildy opened her arms.

"Mikey! It's so good to see you."

She drove the Audi Sport very fast, but also very well. They took a route between low hills, green with early summer, through several small villages to a still smaller one. Pritzendorf consisted of a few shops on three sides of a square boasting a nineteenth-century fountain presided over by a Rubensesque nymph, and was surrounded by substantial country houses dotted among woods and meadows. A couple of hundred metres beyond the village, Hildy swung expertly into and up a precipitously steep drive leading to a hilltop where a towered villa perched.

This had been entirely her idea, and he had demurred when she first proposed it. He told her he had come to Nuremberg solely on account of their father, but she overrode him firmly.

"Me, also. But we have seen him, and know he is getting the best care. His heart mends, and will mend no better if we sit all day beside his bed. We can't even talk to him."

"If I can do no good here, I probably should be getting back to DD."

"DD is fine. Dieter keeps check on that. Johann has been told Papa may be well enough to be taken out of sedation in a couple of days. You cannot go back to England sooner."

His real reluctance, he knew, was at a deeper level. He did not want to think about Stern, or about whatever clinical error might have been responsible for Anna's death. It would not bring her back. There might not, in any case, be anything to it beyond the wild guesses of an emotionally unbalanced young man. Hildy herself had suggested he had been obsessed with Stern: that he had contrived to worm his way into Stern's home bore that out.

But she had been determined to get him out to the house where Berthold Gegener still lived with Stern's widow and two daughters. A further objection, that the widow might be distressed by a visit so soon after her husband's suicide, was confidently dismissed.

"She was OK when I spoke with her. Of course, we will not discuss this other matter in front of her. I said I would come to offer condolence, and that pleased her. And there is no reason my brother should not come with me. I don't know if she suspects it was because of Anna he killed himself, but anyway it is not wrong that you show good will."

Frau Stern was younger than he'd expected, at least fifteen years her husband's junior, and though her hair was dark brown rather than flaxen, she was rosy-cheeked and altogether Germanic in appearance. He liked the new slant that put on Stern's reason for returning from

Israel. Relationships, even – especially – conventionally romantic ones, provided a sounder basis for action than Jungian illusions. The girls were healthy fruits of the genetic mix: Trudi, a lively six-year-old, was a slim Semitic maiden, Hannah a sober Anglo-Saxon toddler, very like her mother.

They were given cakes and lemonade. The cake was practically identical to the one Michael had eaten at the Brosser Clinic, presumably also made from the recipe handed down by Stern's grandmother. Frau Stern apologized for having no alcoholic drink to offer; it had been a principle of Julius to have none in the house. They assured her apology was unnecessary, and sincerely praised the home-made lemonade.

Berthold Gegener had joined them. Michael recognized him from the Christmas party: thin, white, awkwardly put together and prematurely balding. He had been working in his room, he said, but volunteered no details. He seemed ill at ease, but this was plainly not through any lack of closeness to his adopted family. Trudi chattered to him like an older brother, and while his responses were not voluble, there could be no doubt of his fondness for them all.

No mention was made of Anna, or the Clinic, and Michael wondered how Hildy was going to manage the more specific interview she had in mind. It would suit him personally if she were frustrated. But she managed it very well, choosing the right moment to offer Frau Stern help in clearing dishes, and wondering, when she received the expected refusal, if Berthold could show them the garden; of which she knew Dr Stern had been very proud.

The girls came with them. Hildy was exercising her wiles on Gegener, but he seemed unresponsive. Michael wondered if he now regretted the letter which, he must know, had brought them here. Once the immediate shock of Stern's death was over he might have perceived his reaction as excessive.

The house stood on a knoll, with terraces going down to a kitchen garden on their left, level lawn and swimming pool to the right. All was fastidiously neat and well maintained. Further off the ground rose again, part orchard, part paddock, to a higher hill topped with pines. They were more than a hundred metres from the house when Hildy said: "My cigarettes – I am so careless." She ruffled the hair of the older child. "*Trudi, willst du mir meine Zigaretten bringen, bitte? Sollst auf dem Tafel finden – in kleine schwarze Kiste.*"

The child said reprovingly: "*In der Haus' ist Rauchen ganz verboten.*"

"*Aber hier sind wir nicht zu Hause.*" She smiled at Trudi irresistibly. "*Du bist ein' Engel.*"

As Trudi ran towards the house, she said: "Now you can tell us, Berthold." When he did not reply, she added gently: "We do not try to blame Dr Stern. Whatever it was, he has paid for it. He chose the payment when he killed himself."

Gegener turned to look her in the face. His own was twisted in either pain or anger. "He did not kill himself!"

It was warmer here than it had been in Nuremberg. Butterflies danced nearby, and Hannah went off in pursuit. Hildy said: "Berthold, I understand your affection for him…"

He spoke again, stumbling over the words. "I found the journal, in which he wrote daily. It was not in his computer, but I found the *Abdruckscheibe* – the copy disk. There was something wrong in the Total programme of your sister. Something very bad – he did not say what. *'Allzu schrecklich fuer schreiben,'* he said – too terrible to write."

"He called me in England," Michael said. "He was distressed, but he said nothing like that."

"*Allzu schrecklich fuer schreiben.* Or was it from fear he could not write it down? But I know he asked you to come to the Clinic. He wrote that also."

Michael saw again the agonized face on the screen, but still he tried to rationalize it away. "He was obviously terribly upset. Maybe unhinged – capable of anything. Even of killing himself to put an end to his misery."

"With a lethal injection of morphine?"

"If that's what killed him."

Gegener stared at Michael, with bitterness. "It is what killed him. That is certain. I saw a copy of the autopsy report. A lethal injection into the main artery of his left wrist. That was surely a remarkable feat of dexterity – by a left-handed man."

Sitting up in bed, John Frodsham looked pale but not especially unwell. He gestured towards the enormous basket of fruit dwarfing the bedside table.

"Help me out, Mike. Maria-Mercedes will do a check on how much I've eaten when she comes in this evening. She's committed to generosity, but despises waste. At least have a kumquat or two. I never could stand them."

"How are you feeling today?"

"Fine. They're very pleased with me. I'm to stay in till the weekend while they do a few more tests, but after that I'm on indefinite parole. MM's taking on a new cook, for the special diet, and buying me an exercise machine to sit beside her own. His 'n' hers exercisers – how's that for togetherness?"

His father had never, thankfully, put on a show of uxoriousness, but neither had he ever criticized his second wife; the acerbic note was new. Michael had a sense of barriers lowered. His father went on: "I'm glad you came, but we mustn't keep you over here. You ought to be back in England, especially the way things are. Did you hear about the Americans?" Michael shook his head. "It was in the latest news bulletin. They've agreed to the Federation's conditions for evacuation of their troops and civilians. The marines aren't required to surrender arms, but will accept supervision by Federal troops – running a moral gauntlet, you might say, and the television crews will make the most of it. Aronheimer has also agreed to support the Federation's resolution in the United Nations, reiterating the principle of no interference in internal affairs and accepting the Federal High Commission as the only legitimate government of the United Kingdom. I would say that just about kisses goodbye to his chances of re-election in November, wouldn't you? Do you think it's likely to affect your Lucy much?"

"I don't know."

"I liked her."

"Yes."

"I've been wondering" – he tapped his chest – "about this. Doesn't have to be stress-related, of course. Infarctions happen. I thought I might have one that day at Twickenham, when you creamed the French."

"With the help of the rest of the England fifteen."

"Yes. Yes indeed. Sheer joy, that particular stress. But I've not been liking what's been happening lately. Worry into guilt, and guilt back into more worry. It just goes on."

"Why guilt?"

"That's a never-ending why, isn't it? And family and country get mixed up. Family guilts are easier to label: I left two of you behind. I'd rather have taken you with me, but you were old enough to make a choice. Respecting that didn't remove the guilt though – how could

it? Like that fiasco at Christmas: Granny T. dead, so I try to bring Sheaf to Frohsteig."

"It wasn't a fiasco."

"It was for me. And then there's the other guilt. Country. Did you ever come across that bit by E. M. Forster – that if he had to choose between betraying a friend or his country, he hoped he'd betray the country? Bad, and mad. Or stupid. Because country isn't an abstract, it's a sum of things. Things, and people. Parents, children, the friends you had at school... Not just DD, Granny T., you, Anna – but the woman who kept the sweet-shop when I was five, that wonderful crippled lady with a body twisted from birth, who smiled whenever I met her in the High Street... hundreds of people, thousands."

He took a grape out of the basket and stared at it. "When I was little we had a neighbour who had a greenhouse with a Cannon Hall vine. It must be forty years since I tasted one. There have been gains to go with the guilt – of course there have. Two children I loved and left, two more since then. I wouldn't have wanted a world they weren't part of. But I won't pretend I don't ache a bit. Do you know what bothers me most?"

Michael shook his head.

"Growing old in a country where I can't swear in my own language, and be properly understood."

"You could come back. Johann and Hildy are a lot more grown up than we were. Anyway, I sometimes think Johann sounds more English than I do, and Hildy seems to be permanently in London nowadays."

"No. I can't do that. Things go past. But you should go back. You can see I'm all right."

"I will, eventually."

"Go now. There's DD to consider."

"He's fine." Michael drew a deep breath, not knowing why. "I still have something to do here."

XI

"What do you think?" Dieter asked.

"It's impressive."

"Perhaps architecturally a little too severe for a castle of dreams? Maybe something like Neuschwanstein would look better. But I fear it would be less good for working conditions. Dreams do not require

things like heating or air conditioning, but those who make them do. We take such matters seriously."

The headquarters of Frohsteig Wissenschaftliches Verkehrs was sited conveniently on the Frohsteig estate. A pine-crested ridge concealed it from the *schloss*, but twenty minutes' brisk walking brought it into view, and on this fine May morning that was what Dieter had suggested. The Mercedes would have taken almost as long, by the narrow road that twisted and turned round the side of the hill.

It was Hildy who had proposed the expedition, but Dieter had been quick to welcome the idea. He said to Michael: "You have never visited our working centre? Johann has never shown you?"

Michael shook his head. "We walked to the top of the ridge once, and I saw it from a distance. There's never really been time on a short visit."

"And on this visit you have longer. Good, if not for a happy reason. But you are reassured about your father?"

"I had a word with his consultant. He said things were looking well."

"And you will not find a better cardiologist in the world anywhere. You must excuse our German prides, Michael. We have come late to nationhood – we achieved it not long before nations, in Europe, ceased to matter. But as a race we are old. We boast, it is true, but we try our best to set correct standards for the boasting. Anyway, what is important is you are content he is in good hands."

This valley was broader and flatter than the one from which they had come, and had been cleared of all but ornamental vegetation. The complex itself was oval in shape, about two kilometres in length and a third of that across, surrounded by a ring road which offered access at four equidistant points, and was itself accessed through an approach road on the far side. From where they stood, it was possible to walk directly into it, through flowering meadows. Dieter's young black Labrador, George, ran ahead of them, occasionally stopping to look back with twitching impatience.

The actual buildings were of various shapes and sizes, successfully avoiding any monotonous uniformity; even the formal gardens which separated them offered variety as well as neatness. The gardens included a multiplicity of streams and pools, plainly artificial but contriving to look individual, as did the occasional piazza and the bridges and footbridges crossing the streams. When Michael made an approving comment, Dieter nodded satisfaction. Mies van Gebhardt, the industrial architect responsible for overall layout, had, he told them,

spent a year studying garden complexes in China before making his first sketch.

They reached the ring road and crossed it by an underpass, spotlessly clean and with discreet lighting to illuminate pale green ceramic tiles underfoot, and mosaics of Chinese landscapes on the walls. Their voices induced a faint, tranquil echo.

As they came up the exit ramp and found themselves only a few metres from the nearest building, Michael said: "I'm a bit surprised by the lack of security. The hospitals I visit in England have three- or four-metre electrified fences."

"But what do we have to fear," Dieter asked, "here in this quiet land?"

"Industrial espionage? I seem to have heard reports of foreign spy teams on the loose in Europe. And you do claim to have the most highly developed technology in Virtual."

"In Virtual, certainly. In Total even more, I would say, since we have achieved the direct cortical input there too. But we trust our American friends, and our Japanese friends and our Israeli friends. I am joking, you understand. We have protection, more subtle than electric fences and also more effective. We use electronic surveillance. From the top of the ridge, and still now, we are watched; and not by human eyes that can be distracted or nod into sleep. Our invisible watchmen scan perimeter and interior without ceasing, and alert guards if they detect a movement not programmed as acceptable – they will not cry wolf for a rabbit, or a deer even.

"Aesthetically better, would you agree? Psychologically also. Our technicians are happier that no barriers exist. The only exception is in the clinical application area, and that is for protection of the patients."

He pointed to their right, in explanation. They had come through to one of the transverse roads. Several hundred metres along in that direction, the way was blocked by a check-point, guarding a gap in a fence. Beyond the fence stood buildings resembling the wards in the Brosser Clinic.

"The vagrants?" Hildy asked.

"You know of them?" He seemed surprised.

"Johann said something. Not much. Why do they need to be protected?"

Michael echoed her: "Vagrants?"

Dieter shrugged. "*Vagabunden*. It is a term that is used. Some may indeed be such, but being without home explains more. Living in the

streets, in holes in the ground – like animals, except animals look after themselves better. Without home, without aim, without hope. Except the hope of drugs, which is no hope. Some of them can be persuaded to give up the destructive dreams from drugs in return for the therapeutic dreams of Total. But in early days of treatment sometimes they are confused, deranged. There were cases of patients waking and wandering, and doing damage – to valuable equipment and also to themselves. It is chiefly from themselves they are protected."

George, who had run ahead again, came tail-wagging back to a brief whistle from Dieter. His lead was put on and secured to a ring by the door of one of the buildings. Michael wondered if that, and indeed the dog's presence here, represented a status symbol. There had been no sign of other animals; the Labrador might well be an exception underlining a hygienic rule.

This building, unlike others they had passed, was windowless, semi-circular in section, and some twenty metres wide by fifty long. The rooms on either side of a central corridor were of uniform configuration but varied in size; Michael noted that the ceilings were grooved at intervals, so that partitioning walls could be slotted in and out as required.

Dieter pushed a door that swung easily and silently inwards. "Here our authenticators work. Authentication is the *Grund*, the founding stone, for Total. The grass under the dreamer's feet must look like grass, and feel like grass, and smell like grass – grass maybe with sun and wind on it after rain. The ring on a beloved's finger must be genuine, its stone showing the gleam of diamond, not paste. It is a great skill, in truth an art, requiring imagination but also dedication to the littlest details, to perfection.

"Such dedication demands something better than laboratory conditions in which to work – white walls, bright lights, white uniforms. Here the authenticators choose what lighting suits their mood: the mood they are creating. It is for them to select and control. Temperature and humidity also."

They were standing just inside a room whose walls glowed in varying intensities of rose. The air was cool and fresh and faintly flower-fragrant. A helmeted woman, wearing something like a sari, manipulated with flying fingers the controls of a multi-screen console which dwarfed her. She did not turn round. Hildy whispered: "Might we distract her?"

"There is no risk of that." Dieter did not lower his voice. "Environmental conditions are of importance as a background, but when working an authenticator is beyond distraction. Her mind concerns itself only with the scenes before her, with the new world she creates from the innumerable images to which the console gives her access. She is a little god."

When they came out, George barked in excitement and relief. Releasing him from the hitching ring, Dieter cut him short with "*Schweige!*" but appeared dissatisfied with the response. He wagged a threatening finger. "To be hesitant to a command is to be disobedient. And disobedience in a dog requires severe penalty, death even. *Also, sterbe.*" The Labrador dropped to lie at his feet, eyes closed and motionless. "That is better. So, *lebe wieder.*" He smiled at Michael, as George jumped up, panting and wagging. "It is a game we play. Now I will take you to meet a major god – a goddess."

The building at the heart of the complex was a Chinese-style pavilion, of dark wood faced with red panels decorated with golden dragons. These chased one another's tails and breathed fire, but the chasing was more that of kittens at play than predators, and the crimson fire did not look as if it would singe a leaf. The pavilion was abutted by a veranda set with low tables and stools, and bird and animal sculptures. The corner supports were of bamboo, but immensely thick. It could be a veneer, Michael thought, over a core of steel.

Presumably their approach had been monitored by the computers. As they reached the steps giving access to the veranda, a figure emerged from inside. Dieter held his arms out, and was greeted with an embrace.

"Gundula, always it is good to see you. Hildy, my niece, you have already met."

It would be difficult to guess her age: perhaps forty, but with a few years leeway on either side. Her chestnut hair was either natural or dyed with great discretion, and fell thickly and simply. Like Maria-Mercedes, her features showed a classical beauty, but without the cold stillness. Her smile was very warm. She wore a golden brown dress, if not silk then something very like it; simple again, but in classic lines accentuating an attractive figure. She offered Hildy a hand.

"Once or twice, I think, at parties."

"It is not easy to persuade Gundula to attend social occasions. She is not a butterfly like you, Hildy. And this is my English… *Neffe?* Michael Frods-Ham, a sportsman of distinction."

"Nephew. Yes, I know." Her soft hand pressed Michael's firmly, and lingered. "The rugby player who defeated the French – at Twickenham, not Waterloo. A scrum-half, but taller than most."

Her English was excellent and almost accentless. Dieter said: "I am always amazed by the wideness of your knowledge, Gundula, yet still surprised it includes rugby. I have not heard of you as a watcher of sports."

"Sport is a major field in Virtual." She looked at Michael, smiling. "And while for German clients rugby is less important than soccer or athletics or tennis – than basket-ball even – it comes into consideration. You are eternal in our archives."

"And almost everything in the archives is also in Gundula's memory," Dieter said. "An astonishing comprehension. And astonishingly accessible. She retrieves better than any database."

"It is nothing," she said. "A knack, unimportant. What has Dieter shown you, and what would you like to see?"

"He showed us one of your authenticators at work," Michael said. "Impressive, but it's well beyond my grasp."

Gundula nodded. "High skills to an outsider are much like magic. And not all forms of magic are interesting to view. The authenticator builds worlds, but building signifies nothing to a spectator. It is not like watching a potter at the wheel. And nothing, certainly, like seeing a rugby player score a try. Perhaps there is something else I can show you?"

"The vagabonds," Hildy said. Gundula turned to her. "Is it possible to visit the Total wards?"

"Yes, of course."

There had been an edge to Hildy's voice. Michael registered her dislike of the other woman, without understanding why. He felt Gundula had registered it also, though she gave no sign.

"We can do that right away." Gundula stooped to pat the Labrador, who licked her hand. "But we will not take George with us, I think. Although he is the essence of amiability, there is sometimes confusion when a patient emerges from Total, and we will not risk increasing that. However harmless, dog is a threatening image."

The guard at the entrance wore an unmilitary light-blue uniform and did not carry a Heckler-Koch, though a stun pistol was holstered on his belt. He waved them through with a smart salute. Inside, the nursing staff were dressed like nuns, and Michael asked if they were members of a religious order.

Gundula shook her head. "Again, a question of atmosphere. Our psychologists advise that the nun's habit is reassuring to the disturbed."

There were two wards. Conditions, though far less luxurious than in the Brosser Clinic, were very much better than Johann's description of the Warsaw set-up. There was ample room between beds, and each had a locker and chair beside it. The cocoons were standard, and the figures inside them slept as peacefully. Two cocoons were open, and empty. There were pictures on the walls, abstracts in unchallenging pastel shades of colour; and flowers.

At the far end, the ward gave access to a room where there were easy chairs, and windows looking out on wooded slopes. The two patients temporarily out of Total sat there, with glasses of orange juice in front of them. They wore yellow robes and thonged slippers; they looked dazed, but not unhappy. Hildy spoke to them in German, asking how they were, and they answered in slow voices, hesitant but untroubled. One of the nun-figures came with a pitcher to replenish the glasses, and they thanked her politely.

When they left, Dieter drew in a deep breath. "They would be better with fresh air and sunshine, but that is not at the moment in their case practical. What they have is better than drugs, violence, sickness, degradation. That is what always must be remembered. And now I think we go back. George will be impatient."

It was Hildy who insisted on tennis. They hadn't played together since she was a schoolgirl, when he had been obliged to work hard at letting her win a few consolation games, and she surprised him, not only with her skill, but also with the strength in her slender arms. Her serves were low and powerful, her returns stingingly accurate. Michael did win both sets, but they were close run. After showering they lay by the pool, the sun's rays softened but scarcely dimmed by the UV blocker net floating between its support poles, high against the blue.

She said: "I do not like her."

"I noticed that." He paused. "You didn't like Lucy either, did you?"

She twisted round to stare at him indignantly. "You think I do not like her because of you? Because she held your hand too long on greeting, and tenderly again on parting? What pompous arrogance!"

"She kissed Dieter, and I didn't think you cared a lot for that. She is

a woman who likes men, and shows it. What we English call a womanly woman, which I suspect could be what ruffles you. Birds in their little nests may agree, but that doesn't apply to coquettes."

"Would you call this male observation? How can men observe anything, when they are so blind? Not to women's bodies, of course – their eyes gorge there – but to everything else, except the smile of invitation. I cannot help despising them for that."

"Any more than you can help exercising the smile?"

"Yes," she said restlessly. "I can despise myself also, doing something that is so easy. Playing a part for Virtual is better. They see your face, but you do not see theirs. But this is nothing to do with Gundula. I just do not like or trust her."

"Yet Dieter plainly does. May that not be the trouble?"

She said, angrily: "It has nothing to do with you or Dieter! I think she is bad, evil maybe. I did not like any of it. Those poor old men thanking the *ersatz-Nonne* for their fruit juice... and the others lying in their plastic cabinets... There is a big difference between Virtual and Total, I think."

"For whatever reason, you're being emotional about it. I don't know a hospital ward in England as well organized as the one we saw. Or as restful. Perhaps we've both been over-emotional. Berthold could have got it wrong."

"Wrong that Stern found something – and that he was killed because of it, not a suicide?"

"You have to admit Berthold is a very odd character."

"If he is odd, what is Gundula? But she flatters you."

"I'd have thought Berthold's worshipful attitude at the Christmas party was pretty flattering, too."

They went on wrangling, on Michael's part not unenjoyably. Gegener's tense white face and tortuous suspicions seemed a long way off. The sun was warm, the scene relaxing, his half-sister a pretty, lively young woman who no longer represented a threat. Lucy was his security, assured though remote. According to the bulletins, the American evacuation had been completed without incident and things were quiet in Britain. On a day like this, he could not believe that it would be too long before he saw her again.

The buzz of Hildy's phone interrupted them. Past the curve of her shoulder he saw Gegener's face, too small to reveal expression. But the voice, in rapid German, sounded strained.

It was not a long conversation. When it ended, Hildy said: "He is at the Clinic. He wants to see us again."

"When?"

"As soon as possible. Tomorrow morning."

"At the Clinic?"

"Not at the Clinic. At Pritzendorf. He is driving back there tonight."

Maria-Mercedes had a dinner party that evening, with Dieter presiding in place of her stricken husband. Guests were the von Grenzendorfs and two other couples who, though not specified as listed in the Almanac, looked as though they might be. The wild boar, presented whole on an enormous platter decorated with hunters in horned helmets, was devoured with relish, washed down with burgundy from silver goblets. Michael allowed his to be replenished more than he would normally have thought sensible, as a distraction from the conversation. It was conducted, for his benefit, entirely in English, and was banal in the extreme.

The port that appeared when the ladies retired was presumably for his benefit also, and the conversation relaxed to the extent of the gentlemen exercising their English in dirty and unfunny jokes. It was almost a relief when Friedrich von Grenzendorf switched into the familiar vilification of *Auslaender*. Foreigners, he translated helpfully: foreign vermin. But also dangerous, continually more bold. It was past time the situation was taken in hand, and Western Europe made safe for its ancient peoples.

Michael was alone in the breakfast room the following morning when a call came through from Johann – Dieter had left, Hildy was probably in her bath, and nothing was permitted to disturb Maria-Mercedes before ten thirty.

"How is Papa?" Johann asked.

"Coming on well. How's Tokyo?"

"As ever, boring. But I only have one more company dinner to endure. I'll be with you tomorrow, I hope. How did last evening go?"

"It was interesting."

Johann laughed. "Lied gallantly, like a true Englishman. Give everyone my love."

Hildy came down dewy-fresh, and drove with her usual verve. He could have done with her taking it more easily, especially on the tight

bends as the road wound up through the hills. He was glad to recognize a roadside shrine not far from Pritzendorf, then nauseated by her slamming on brakes as she came out of a curve. They were confronted by a road block.

The German was too fast for him to attempt to follow, but he gathered that the police *Unteroffizier* was prohibiting their onward progress, and Hildy was rejecting the prohibition. He heard her mention Frau Stern, and saw colour leave her face at the sergeant's response. She brought in Dieter's name then; emphatically, and with effect. The sergeant saluted and waved them on. As she weaved the car between the barriers, Michael asked: "What's wrong?"

"A fire, he said. At the Stern house."

The village was deserted as they drove through in silence. The explanation for that appeared when they came in sight of where the house had stood. The road was lined with figures, staring up at a heap of rubble from which a few rags of smoke still rose.

Hildy stopped short of the row of police cars, and they got out. Michael felt a different nausea, along with disbelief and something like dread. Hildy's voice, questioning the officer in charge, was weirdly distant.

"Well?" he asked.

Her face was tight. "They are dead."

He thought of cakes and lemonade, slim lively Trudi, younger, more sober Hannah. Healthy fruits of a genetic mix... beautiful laughing children...

"Are they sure?" He looked at the charred ruins, at no point more than a metre above ground level. "They might have gone away – been staying somewhere else."

She said in a bleak voice: "They took four bodies out, he said. A man, a woman, two..."

He put an arm round her, trying to remember what it had been like all those years ago when she too had been a child, in a world that could offer no worse horror than the death of a puppy.

"Did he say how it happened?"

"*Auslaender*. Another house was burned some months ago, on the other side of the village, but the people there escaped. A heavy truck was heard going through, in the night. They used flame-throwers."

The news had reached Frohsteig by the time they got back. Dieter was at the house, in the library. He poured brandy into Waterford glasses.

"You will need a drink. *Ist unmoeglich*. How could anyone do such a thing? Those children... I have not been one of those who hated *Auslaender*. They are human beings, as we all are. But how could they do such a thing?"

For Michael, Dieter's words released doubts which had been suppressed under shock and horror. It wasn't *Auslaender* who had driven Stern to suicide – or murdered him, according to Gegener. *Auslaender* weren't responsible for whatever had killed Anna. He wanted to say that, but saw Hildy look at him in appeal. She had asked him not to involve Dieter, and clearly still did not want to.

It was overwhelmingly important to think clearly and stay cool. He reminded himself that the human mind was desperately egocentric. As a boy he had believed in reincarnation simply because of a recurrent thought that there had once been a time when Sunday came before Saturday. The rationalization was that he must have been a Jew in a previous life, and could recall *Sabat* coming before the secular holiday. But there had been another, equally convincing, false memory: of a rugby international match being played, in his very early childhood, on the Flats at Sheaf. In the sophistication of teens, he had recognized the impossibility of the second proposition, and worked it out as resulting from confusion, in a childish mind, between a game shown on television and a local one witnessed on the same day, or near it. He had not been tempted by reincarnation theories since then.

The fact that man was a linking animal should not blind one to the possibilities and power of chance. Lucy was an example. Their first meeting had been at a party given by a London friend with vague US Embassy connections. Michael had quite liked her, but made no attempt to get a phone number, or angle for a date. It was some days later, dropping into an exhibition in Piccadilly featuring some of Anna's paintings, that he saw again the strikingly beautiful black girl in the next room, and went to her – propelled by a sense of destiny.

In love with her he had been tempted again, this time by the notion of a second encounter ordained by fate. The presence of both of them, in that place and at that time, had seemed a benevolent miracle: she had been on the point of leaving and he had come from a meeting which ended half an hour earlier than usual. But grasping the gifts of

chance was not the same as assuming they were intentional. Whether or not there was an infinity of possible universes, the possibilities of the universe we actually knew were infinite; and indifferent.

That also meant that conspiracy theories were to be mistrusted, precisely because they harmonized with the mind's egocentric bias. Anna's death might, or might not, be linked with Stern's; or, more remotely, with Gegener's. To tie those events into an intrigue involving the German state police and the Bavarian fire services was as irrational as his boyish belief in reincarnation.

He felt slightly soothed by the brandy. He simply said: "No, I don't know how anyone could have done it."

Lunch was subdued. Even Maria-Mercedes seemed shocked out of her calm. "*Fuerchterlich... unglaublich*," she murmured, shaking the bell of her matutinally refurbished coiffure. Afterwards they went different ways, in Michael's case to his room. He felt tired, and lay on the bed, trying to make sense out of confusion.

The line of suspicion which had started with Stern had led to Gegener, and had ended with him. Despite Hildy's reluctance, there could be no way forward now except by involving Dieter. Yet there was nothing positive to show him, nothing even to pass on except the suspicions of a man Dieter had already dismissed as unbalanced, and those of his fanatical disciple.

The console beside his bed buzzed softly. This was part of the technological luxury of life at the *schloss*, a system providing television, and internal as well as external phonecalls. A green light on the panel winked under 5. Hildy: he pressed for receive, and she came in view.

"Can you come to my room? Now?"

Her door opened to a push. She looked at him from a chair behind her desk. The expression in her face was not one of welcome, but a look of cold fear. Her left hand was clenched in her lap. Her right held a letter, a couple of pages in crabbed German script.

"It came in this morning's mail," she said. "I have not looked at it till now."

It was another minor luxury that Moritz took in the household mail, sorted it, and had it despatched to the appropriate room, where it was left in a mahogany rack inside the door. Mail usually arrived about

nine, and was delivered before ten. They had been on their way to Pritzendorf soon after nine.

"From Berthold."

"Go on."

"He found something else. He found what Stern had found – that which was too terrible to write down. He has not written it, either. He wanted to see us, talk about it. But he thought he might be under suspicion, like Stern. That was why he told us come to Pritzendorf, not the Clinic. And in case something happened to him, he sent a copy of what he had found." She opened her left hand. "This is it."

He recognized a Virtual disk, a small square of metal and plastic holding hundreds of gigabytes of electronic memory: enough to fuel the creation of a new universe. With a sick conviction of knowing the answer, Michael asked her: "Does he say what it is?"

"He says: a part of Anna's Total program."

"What part? What's in it?"

Hildy shook her head. "He says only – horrible." On her desk lay glove and helmet. "I thought I should esp it, but I could not. I am a coward, Mikey."

He did not know how he could face it either, but knew he must. He put out his hand for the equipment, and the disk.

At first there was an unsettling sense of duality: he was at the same time experiencing, and a spectator to, the experience of another. He understood it was an artificial world, and knew it was Anna's, created to nourish her imaginings and longings. There was colour and sound and tactility. He – or she or they – walked through a landscape very like Flintly Woods, a few miles north of Sheaf. The season was spring, early April perhaps. Daffodils fluttered in a gentle breeze, and the ground was patched thickly white with anemones. Birds sang: he recognized blackbird and thrush, a dove, the harsh chatter of a magpie softened by distance and the beauty of the day. Everything breathed regeneration, and an imminent renewal of summer.

Gradually his identity faded into hers: this was Anna's world, and it was she who was walking along the bridle path, with tall trees close on either side and branches budding green against a bright blue foil of sky. He shared warmth and light and sensation with her, and also somehow anticipation of what lay no more than a few metres away, where the bridle path and a broader avenue joined.

And he felt with her the shock of joy as anticipation became reality. She came from the cover of trees into a long march, empty except for one thing, one person. Adam stood there, regarding her gravely for a moment, then running to her – crossing the aching distance on a child's stumbling feet. Her arms opened, and the boy came into them. In a world already bursting with loveliness, the feel of his flesh against hers, the unforgettable smell of his body, was an all-surpassing ecstasy.

After ecstasy there was ordinary happiness. They walked down the march together, soft grass underfoot, the breeze mild on their faces. It was good to have the small hand clasping hers, but good also to see him dart away to investigate a rabbit hole or dabble his fingers in an unexpected stream, knowing the physical separation would so soon be ended by his return. He chattered to her – of a party he'd been to, his new school, the dog he might have for his birthday – and she answered, not knowing what she said, nor caring.

They reached a pond, where a kingfisher flashed and flew away. He cried: "Mummy, look!" – not at the vanishing brilliance of emerald and tangerine, but towards the ropes of frogspawn he had glimpsed in the clear water of the pool. He knelt to peer more closely.

Then nightmare tore the universe apart.

Wrenching loss was at the heart of it, but everything had gone – sunlit sky, trees, grass – replaced first by bitter-tasting blackness, then unspeakable horror. There was slime on her skin, mixed with burning acid and crawling filth. Eyes and ears were assaulted, battered, by sounds and images out of Hell. A chilling, pitiless voice condemned her, not to death but to an eternity of pain and degradation; and the condemnation became real in whips and burning pincers that tore and gouged her flesh. She knew with a dreadful certainty this would go on forever, and knew there was no way of escaping it – no hope of oblivion. The voice issued from a face against which she could not shut her eyes: hateful and hating, rotten-fanged, stinking close. She was utterly at its mercy, and knew that in this world mercy did not exist.

All the while, more intense even than the fear and pain and despair, was the greatest torture: where was Adam? Was this agony, this undying death, happening to him too?

It was unbearable. Selfishly, ruthlessly, finally Michael fought for his identity. Even when he regained it, he felt helpless, incapable of moving a finger. He fought again, for his life this time, and found and pressed the switch.

It was an evening ritual that Moritz served drinks in the Pink Room at six o'clock, and equally established that after one vodka with low-calorie tonic, crushed ice and lemon zest, Maria-Mercedes retired for her pre-prandial bath, and change of gown and make-up. From their chairs in front of the great fireplace, crimson with the flames of massed azaleas, Dieter, Hildy and Michael watched as she ascended the staircase, until it turned and took her out of sight.

Dropping the mask of brightness, Hildy said: "Dieter, we must tell you…"

She broke off. He gazed at her benevolently, champagne cocktail in hand. "Tell me what?"

For a moment, she turned to Michael in appeal. He had no answer to it. It had been her decision to do the talking but even if she wanted to change her mind he did not feel he could help her. He was back inside Anna's dream, knowing again the fear and disgust and despair.

Hildy drew breath, and talked. She told the story brokenly, but in full. As though through the wrong end of a telescope, Michael saw Dieter, listening impassively. At the end she said: "Michael esp'd it – went into the dream. I couldn't. He told me about it, as much as he could tell. It wasn't the same as being in it – how could it be? – but I saw his face. Dieter, it was Gundula, I know it was. She is in charge of everything, you said so. But why, why? Even for such evil, there must be a reason."

Dieter set down his glass on the table by his chair. He said: "For evil, perhaps you can seek a reason. But there is no evil in this."

She stared at him. "You knew…"

"A reason for evil," Dieter said, "but not always for error. Mistakes happen, sometimes very bad mistakes. They cannot always be reversed. All that is possible is to try making right what remains."

Her eyes had not left his face. She said: "Anna… it was the bad dream that killed her. It was so terrible, and so strong, that Michael found it almost impossible to switch it off, even from Virtual. In Total, there is no switching off, no way out. Instead, her heart stopped."

"When Anna came to us," Dieter said, "her condition was very bad. Suicide was possible – probable even. She was given best care, by Stern himself. Dreams were planned for her – dreams that centred on Adam. The initial programming, as always, was here in the complex. Then the program is sent to the Clinic for adjustments. At the last, it returns here. For perfecting, you understand.

"For authentication one needs talent that is close to genius, for dream-making much more – true genius. And with genius are always problems. The gods fight in vain against stupidity, but stupidity can be seen at least, and understood. This is not so with genius. We gave Anna's programming to our best man. There had been problems with him too, but his work, at its best, was the finest. And the problems were thought not to lie outside the normal parameters. One does not lightly hand such a one over to the psychotherapists, who adjust the emotion and maybe kill the creative part. Gundula judged him reliable, and I accepted her judgement. We were wrong. When the programme came back, for finishing, he overwrote the end with this new one."

His eyes went to Michael: a reasonable look, man to man, expecting understanding. "When Anna died, Gundula did her duty. She checked, with thoroughness, and discovered the program disk. Then she called in the psychotherapists. They examined the programmer. The problems had been greater than she knew, or could have guessed. He is diagnosed psychotic, now strictly confined. They do not think he will recover. It is probable he suffers great mental torment, which cannot be helped or ended without also ending his life. And of course the law forbids that."

"And Stern?" Hildy asked.

"He had first queried the cause of Anna's death. Through him, Gundula obtained the program disk. She explained to him fully: the mistake, the results of the clinical examination of the programmer, the steps taken to be sure it will not happen again. He was a man of guilts – he could not see things rationally. He called you, Michael, and that would not have been the end of it. He was Director of the Clinic and felt responsibility. I think perhaps he would have killed himself, anyway."

"But Gundula arranged it for him," Michael said. "Even though, as you say, the law forbids it."

Dieter shrugged. "All laws are in hierarchy. What the lower forbids, the higher may require."

"And the higher is – saving Gundula's skin, and yours?"

"No. The higher law in this case is the security of the state – beside which the life of an individual is unimportant." There was a silence, as Michael looked at him. "There was connection with a project which must not be put at risk."

He had been rattled after all, despite his apparent composure, to let

that last bit slip out. Another connection suddenly dropped into place, like a jigsaw piece one had been looking at but not properly seeing.

"Your vagabonds," Michael said, "the ones without homes, without friends... do they sometimes die of heart failure in the middle of their Total dreams?"

"Oh, no. That is not possible!" Hildy exclaimed. "It could not be..."

Deliberately, Dieter picked up his glass and drank. "You have suspicions. It is better if they are not roused, or are dismissed. But if not, next best is to explain. But the explanation must stay within this room."

"You and I, all of us, make plans against the future – for ourselves, as individuals. The state is bigger, and less selfish. Since many years the economics of the world have got worse, and get worse still. Masses of people – tens of millions, hundreds – are unemployed, unemployable. It is a situation from which only disaster can come, for everyone.

"The state has asked our help. With Total we can make things easier, putting men into dreams where they make few demands on the economy. Yet they cannot remain in Total always. They must come back to the real world, which is more grey than the bright world of dreams. That is where our latest research may help. It is possible that in the dreams there can be also persuasion – patterns of contentment may be created which continue after the dream is taken away."

"By which you mean brain-washing," Michael said. "Much more sophisticated than the old combination of drugs and sensory deprivation and suggestion. With permanent serfdom as its end product, a *Lumpenproletariat* of happy slaves. And a little research on the side into ways of killing them by nightmares in their sleep, just in case it doesn't work?"

For the first time, Dieter looked disturbed. "I told you, that was one man, a madman. Whatever he did was not authorized. How could you think it possible I would authorize such a thing? You have known me a long time, Michael. Do you think me vicious?"

"Vicious? Anna died, in a manner horrible beyond belief, and your whole concern was to cover it up. You had Stern killed because he refused to go along with that. Then Gegener. But not just Gegener – an innocent woman, two children, burned to death..."

"It should not have happened – Stern's widow and children. We had information they will go to visit her sister the day before, that they are

not at the house that night. We did not know the sister cancelled this visit."

"So that was just another mistake," Michael said. "An error that cannot be reversed, so you make good what remains. Do I think you vicious? It doesn't matter what I think, does it? What matters is your utter blindness – to what you've done, what you're still doing. For the glory of the state?"

Dieter rose from his chair. "Argument is for individuals. There comes a point at which it is useless, dangerous. Whether or not the state has glory, it is above such trivialities. It enforces duty, and its own preservation. This includes the preservation of its secrets. Now let us look at things reasonably. We are not only friends, but of one family." He stood before Hildy. "This goes no further. I have your word?"

Michael looked past him at her. "Anna, dying in torment. Stern, killed for his Jewish conscience. Berthold, burned to death because he was going to tell us what he'd found. Elizabeth Stern... Trudi... Hannah..."

Dieter reached down, and took Hildy's hands. She looked very small against his bulk. But there was more to it than that, Michael suddenly saw. In his look there was unassailable confidence – the confidence of one who knows his power is beyond question, the power of the seducer over the seduced.

"I have your word, Hildy."

It was not a question. She nodded, without speaking. Dieter let go her hands and turned to Michael. "I do not need to ask you, do I?"

XII

He woke to unobtrusive birdsong. The initial confusion over where he was turned to helpless anger as he remembered. Underlying the birdsong he could hear the hum of an air-conditioning unit. He was on a futon in a room about four metres square, with a white sanitary unit – WC, wash-basin, shower – neatly taking up one corner. Other furniture consisted of a small table and two chairs, one upright at the table, the other a lounge chair. Surfaces were rounded and padded, and he guessed they were bolted to the floor.

The floor itself was dark blue, the windowless walls and ceiling azure. A television screen was sealed into one wall, with controls recessed in the desk. Above the screen, plexiglass protected a camera lens which

covered the room on wide-angle, but was switchable to close-up. The room, Dieter had assured him, was sound-proofed as well as air-conditioned; the door had no handle on this side.

So what about the birdsong?

Of course. Dieter had also explained the room's normal function: for the safe securing of disturbed patients. Birdsong was probably deemed therapeutic as a background, like the two-tone colour scheme. Blue for serenity.

He threw back the flimsy cover and got up. He had slept naked, but the light robe he had been given when his clothes were taken was lying across the easy chair. He put it on, tying the belt, and slipped on the sandals that had also been provided. The desk control panel featured buttons additional to those for television and phone. A setting marked 'Auto' toggled with 'Off': the birdsong ceased when he pressed it. There was also a Call button, and he pressed that.

From the wall-speaker, a male voice asked in clear English: "May I help you? Do you wish something?"

"Breakfast?" Michael asked.

"Of course. What do you choose?"

"What do you offer?"

"Anything the kitchen can provide. Most things, that is. English breakfast, if you wish. Bacon, eggs, sausages—"

"Coffee and a croissant will do."

He clicked off and paced the room, recalling the previous evening. Although the confrontation must have taken Dieter by surprise – the failure to monitor Hildy's mail had presumably been another unfortunate error, like the killing of Frau Stern and her children – emergency precautions had been in place. It would not have occurred to Michael to expect Moritz to arrive, armed, to a bell cord summons. The security guards had been there soon afterwards.

Otherwise Dieter's reactions had been in character and, after the revelation of the nature of the Total research programme, predictable. Hildy's had been less so. Michael's appeal to her had fallen not so much on stony ground as into an echoless abyss. He had looked at her as he was taken away by the guards, huddled small in her chair, refusing to return the glance. Whatever its roots, Dieter's dominance over her was of long standing, and absolute.

Breakfast arrived within ten minutes: the door opened without warning and one of the pseudo-nuns set a tray on the table, making

no reply when he thanked her. There was a cafetiere of strong coffee, jugs of cream and hot milk, two croissants on a plate under a heat-retaining cover, a pot of butter and a small bowl of Cooper's Oxford marmalade. He was hungrier than he had thought, and left only crumbs. He had just refilled his cup when Gundula came in, similarly unheralded.

Her dress this morning was pale grey, but with flame-red revers at the neck and a broad belt in matching material. Like yesterday's, it clung to her pleasantly. The smile was as pleasant too.

"Michael. I hope you slept well."

"Reasonably, all things considered. I can't offer you coffee. They only brought me one cup, and anyway I've finished the pot."

She shook her head. "I am just looking in to see you are OK."

"You can see that from outside, of course, can't you?" He nodded towards the lens. "But thanks for the call. I suppose you wouldn't care to fill me in on what happens next?"

"Dieter will have to explain that. I have executive function only."

"And when may I expect to see Dieter?"

She shrugged, a pretty gesture. "He is very busy, as you know. He will come to talk to you as soon as possible. Meanwhile, he is anxious you are well cared for. If there is anything you wish – books, magazines maybe…"

"If I'm to be here long, I imagine books will be useful. I'll make a list, shall I? Meanwhile, magazines in English would be welcome. Anything you have."

"That will be arranged."

Her nod carried a hint of mission completed. He had a sudden reluctance, fear almost, of being left alone. He asked: "Do you have time to talk?"

She smiled warily. "On what subject?"

She had already ruled out discussion of Dieter's plans for him. The question of the morality of mental experimentation on people without consent was unlikely to produce any more positive response. He said: "Whatever you like. Anything."

The smile became easier. "That may be nice. But I too am busy now. Later, we will talk."

Reading matter arrived within the half-hour – a couple of general leisure magazines, an arts journal dealing principally with

television, *Sport UK*, and *Spot-On*, a weekly news review. He glanced through that first. It included an account of the American withdrawal from Liverpool, emphasizing that it was not only a surrender, but a mortal blow to the anti-Euro forces in Britain. A boxed editorial crowed in boldface that this was the moment of truth. There had always been, at the heart of the reactionary movement, the ludicrous dream of reverse colonization: of American forces crossing the Atlantic to detach the British Isles from Europe and turn them into a fifty-first state. Sadly for them, but coming as long overdue relief to the British people as a whole, that dream was now finally exposed as a treacherous sham. America had been taught a lesson; and Europe and Britain – Britain within Europe as history and logic demanded – could get on with their lives in peace and security.

Time passed. Michael skimmed through the remaining magazines, tried to follow German television for a while, then went back to the magazines and read them more thoroughly. *Sport UK* had a piece on rugby: the expected arrival on the international scene of Germany, with a side to be managed and coached by Michael Frodsham of Wasps and England, was yet another sign of the healthy spread of British influence in European sport.

He was given a generous choice of menu for lunch, and it was served with the half bottle of red wine he'd asked for. Later there was tea – a choice of Assam or Earl Grey, and the tray included a slice of English fruit-cake. His father always insisted on fruit-cake for tea at Schloss Frohsteig; he wondered if he had been told anything but guessed not. Dieter would think it wrong to risk unnecessary distress to someone recovering from a heart attack. Michael recalled his plaintive response, the previous evening: "Do you think me vicious?"

Later still, there was dinner, and another half bottle of wine. The nurse collected the tray afterwards, uncommunicative as ever. He suspected that was it for the day, brushed his teeth, showered, and made himself ready for bed. The TV clock told him it was a little past nine.

The call buzz made him wonder if in-house comforts extended to cocoa and biscuits, but it wasn't the guard's face that came on screen. "Mike? OK for me to come in?" Johann said.

He nodded. "Nice of you to ask."

Johann hugged him on entering; the pressure of another body was a comfort. When they separated, Johann sat on the edge of the table, looking at him.

"I got back less than an hour ago. The usual flight delay. How are you?"

"Fine. Well looked after. A little curious as to what comes next."

"Dieter's filled me in on things – from his point of view, it goes without saying. I'll run it through, so we know where we stand." He did that quickly and comprehensively. "Anything important I've left out?"

"Not from Dieter's point of view. No, I wouldn't say he omitted anything. Taking his word for good intentions, and giving him the benefit of all doubts, it's just a simple story of large-scale experimentation on human beings, with the unfortunate side effect of Anna dying under mental torture, and a cover-up featuring two planned plus three unintentional deaths. Nothing important missing."

"Tell me one thing." Johann's voice was earnest. "Do you think I had any idea what was going on?"

"Which part of what was going on would that be?"

"Any of it."

"No," Michael said, "I don't think you did. But you do now. The question is – what do you propose to do about it?"

"I've told Dieter it's got to stop."

"Again, which part? The murdering, or the murderous project?"

"Both."

"And what did Dieter say to that?"

"The project's already being wound down. As he said, it was government-funded and government-controlled. And Top Secret, which was why I wasn't told. I've never been in on the research side, in any case. Computer Science wasn't a priority during my time at Eton."

"Do you believe it – about being wound down?"

"I may not know anything about computer research, but I know a bit about committees. They're usually technically incompetent, but not keen to acknowledge it. In this case they took bad advice, and then pushed on with it because that's what committees do. But they can be shaken out of pushing on. It seems the report on Anna's death came as a nasty shock."

"Well, it was, wasn't it? A very nasty shock. Literally."

"Yes." Johann was silent. "I suppose I've been trying to avoid thinking about it. But the programmer was mad."

"Even if you can be certain of distinguishing mad from bad, there

are degrees of insanity. Which category would you say authorizing mind control came into? And committees – we're talking about people – can recover from shocks."

"That's something I am in a position to do something about. Now I've been put in the picture, I'm not going to be put out again."

He sounded as if he meant it. He was young, of course. Michael said: "What about me, then? Can I go home?"

The hesitation was sufficient answer.

Johann said: "Dieter says this won't be for long – a few days maybe. He said if he let you go now, he couldn't be sure you wouldn't blow the whistle right away, which could be disastrous. It's a delicate situation. He said you refused to give an undertaking not to."

"I saw no point in lying. And I wouldn't have expected Dieter to believe me if I had."

"Does that mean you don't trust us… me neither?"

"Trust is multi-factorial. Good will's one thing; good judgement's another."

"I'm sorry you feel like that, Mike." Johann gave a small downward jerk with his head. "But you'll be out of here in a few days."

"I don't think so."

"I guarantee it."

"You more or less guaranteed Anna too, didn't you? All right, wince; but I don't think the comparison's unfair. Neither Hildy nor Dieter have been to see me today, and I can understand the reason in both cases. Hildy simply feels bad about what she's done – or not done. Dieter doesn't want to look at what he's going to do – doesn't want to look into the eyes of a man he's condemned to death. It's almost endearing he should be so squeamish. He had Stern killed, and then Gegener, without a moment's hesitation. You may think he'll make an exception for me, because I'm family. You underrate him."

Johann rubbed the scar on his cheek. "You're wrong. I absolutely know you're wrong." They looked at one another across the room. "I'll come back in the morning."

Michael felt surprisingly calm after Johann had gone, but not sleepy. He was lying on the futon, re-reading *Sport UK*, when the door opened to admit Gundula. She wore a loose robe of cinnamon-coloured silk. If there was anything underneath, it had to be extremely flimsy: the Emperor's new clothes, he guessed.

He said: "I suppose people not knocking is one of the minor drawbacks to imprisonment. Trivial; like a hang-nail."

She smiled it down. "What are you reading, Michael? About one of your own exploits, perhaps?"

He shook his head. "The rugby season's over, like some other things."

"You said you would like to talk. I am not busy any more."

He stood up. "What do you think might be a good topic? Obviously not why I'm here, or what comes next. As you said, you only have executive function."

"There are plenty of things we can talk about. Nice things, happy things."

She made no move towards him, but every line of her body demanded the move from him. Her confidence, and his instinctive response to it, shocked him. Stimuli were stimuli, appetite a ravenous moron. Part of his mind was aware of lust almost as an abstraction, but another part screamed for surrender – of thought, will, everything, including loyalty.

He glanced up at the camera in the wall. "A recorded discussion?"

She shook her head. "It is disabled. The guard will not disturb us. I told him it may be some time before I need him again."

The sense of inevitability, of sliding towards mindless satisfaction and release, was almost overwhelming. This was not the way it had been with Hildy. The further random thought, shattering the mood, was not of Lucy, but Dieter. Did he know about this? Had he even planned it, giving an instruction to his faithful aide? For some obscure manoeuvring purpose, perhaps, or out of his own twisted notion of benevolence? The condemned man enjoyed a hearty orgasm…

His trusted aide, his female doppelgaenger. Whether on Dieter's instruction or not, she would bed him tonight and have him killed tomorrow with the same efficient smile. Lucy, my darling, he thought – I'm not going to see you again, and I don't suppose you'd reproach me too much if you knew, but I'm not going to betray you during the last bit of everything, for the momentary pleasure of fucking a heartless bitch like this.

"I'm tired," he said. "You can call the guard now."

"Are you sure?"

She still did not move. Her lust, he guessed, was as strong as his own had been, but she had it under control. Control was her métier. He speculated on the other satisfaction available, of putting his hands

round her neck and squeezing the life from her beautiful body. The guard was not on watch, and even if she'd lied about that or the guard had disobeyed orders, he was confident he could strangle her before help arrived.

He shook his head. "I'm sure."

Michael was not much surprised when Johann failed to keep his promise of returning the next morning. He had made more of an effort than Hildy, but pressures were pressures, and Dieter was expert at exerting them. He followed the routines available – ablutions, breakfast, desultory scanning of television, lunch. When the tray was removed, the books he'd ordered the previous day were delivered.

He'd made a quick selection from the teletext list of books in English: a couple of thrillers, a biography (*Churchill, First European Federalist*), *Anna Karenina* in a new translation he'd seen praised, and *Northanger Abbey*. Time, he suspected, might be short: too short for *Anna Karenina* or *Churchill, First European Federalist*, or indeed, as far as the thrillers were concerned, for embarking on the solution of any puzzle whose resolution might survive his own. He settled instead for the chatter of Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe, and their shared ecstasies at the horrors of gothic imagination. He was reflecting on the calamity of rain threatening the prospect of another visit to the Pump Room, when Johann arrived.

"Good to see you, Jo'," he said.

His half-brother looked ill at ease, which was scarcely surprising. It was something that, unlike Hildy, he had not backed away from a guilt-inducing encounter. In a voice conspicuously lacking its usual lightness, Johann said abruptly: "I'm quite sure you're wrong – about Dieter."

There would be no point in arguing. Michael felt he could afford to make things easy for him. "That's OK."

"But it is my view, against yours, and if you were right…" Michael did not respond. "Dieter's taking the early afternoon flight to an appointment in Berlin. Gundula was more tricky, but I've organized an emergency in our plant on the other side of the city. She's gone there to sort things out. It'll take her several hours, and meanwhile I'm in charge here.

"I've got people I can trust, who can get you to England. To Sheaf, if you want, but I'd recommend further north. The whole of the

Southeast is under Carolingian control. If you really are at risk, you'd still be at risk there."

"Further north? Then what happened at Liverpool didn't put an end to resistance?"

"No. The reverse, in fact. For some reason it made the other tribes on the islands rally in support of the English. Even the Irish. The present holding line runs from Cardiff to the Wash."

"Someone once described that as a line north of which Hell begins. Maybe they got it wrong. You can really help me get to Sheaf? What about the risk to you?"

"If Sheaf's what you want. Don't worry about me. I can deal with Dieter."

"I hope you can. I'm grabbing the lifeline, anyway." He looked at Johann, and smiled. "Thanks for everything. You may be right about Dieter's plans for me, but if you're wrong I owe you a life."

Michael was dropped at the point he'd specified, near the bottom of Sheaf Hill. Hans, his driver and companion over the previous forty-eight hours, wished him luck with what sounded like sincerity. He was a dour Schwabian, plainly unhappy outside German-speaking territory, but they had got on well despite linguistic limitations. It had all gone very smoothly in fact. Controls were markedly in evidence, on the English side of the Tunnel especially, but Johann's *laissez-passer* went unchallenged.

He walked under a half moon down the narrow tree-hemmed stretch of Deadman's Lane, named for the bodies laid out there after one of the more severe French onslaughts of the twelfth century. It offered an inconspicuous entry to the town, though he doubted if the Carolingians would be very active on night patrols anyway. Sheaf was a long way behind the lines.

Friars Hill indeed was empty apart from Ginger, a grossly overweight tomcat without a permanent home but on the hand-out list of most of the town's restaurants. He arched his back to be stroked, producing his incongruously plaintive miaou. The streetlamp on the hill lit up the side door, but the house was dark. Michael let himself in, and made his way through to the kitchen before switching a light on. It was suddenly of vital importance that the whisky bottle should be in its usual place, in the cupboard to the right of the Aga.

He turned, glass in hand, at the sound of footsteps. It could only

be DD, but it didn't sound like him. Nor was it. He stared at her as she stood in the doorway, in wonder and amazement.

"They say you ought never to try pulling the same trick twice," Lucy said. "But I couldn't talk you into coming my way, and it didn't seem to leave much of an alternative."

XIII

Sheaf Harbour lies two miles from the town, connected with it by the river Trug, whose broad channel meanders between mudbanks across the Marsh. Towering steeply above the river at low tide, at high tide the banks are reduced to exiguous ramparts across which, in summer, sheep stare at people in passing craft, virtually eye to eye. It offers a prettily pastoral scene in the green heat of a sultry afternoon. In the black chill of a winter's night, there was nothing to see but the bobbing lights of other fishing boats, ahead and astern.

Huddled inside his waterproof, Michael counted them again, compulsively. Eleven: the full complement – for the moment at any rate, the *Sheaf Princess'* dicky engine was holding out. On two previous mornings, winds close to gale force had prevented sailing. The south-easter against which they were beating was still stiff, and the sea beyond the harbour would be rough, but he had taken the decision to go ahead. Two days confined below deck, with the constant danger of a snap inspection by Federal troops, was more than long enough. Apart from questions of morale, the forecast had another low coming in from the Atlantic. This was a poor weather window, but the only one they had.

Lucy squeezed his hand, and he ventured a quick embrace. They had agreed, when she talked him into letting her come along, to put physical contact into suspension, but the night was very dark. He thought, as he had done many times during the past days, that he ought to have been firmer about insisting she stay behind. But she had turned his main argument on its head: since there were half a dozen other women on the expedition, their known relationship would have made rejecting her the wrong kind of discrimination.

He was in any case accustomed by now to her having the last word on major decisions. Her position, as she'd made clear the night he'd found her again in Georgian House, was simple. She was her mother's daughter; and having chosen her man would allow no obstacle to keep her from him. Which meant, since he would not cross the Atlantic to

her, she had to come to him. Having done so, she was going to keep him in sight – something she had steadfastly achieved during the months of nomadic life in unoccupied Britain and through several guerrilla sorties to the south.

His secondary argument, relating to her special vulnerability through being conspicuous – a woman, American, and black – had received equally short shrift. If things went wrong, and they were captured, she wasn't likely to be treated worse than anyone else but probably a good deal better. The greatest hazard was likely to be over-exposure to camera lighting when they produced her as a television trophy. They would have a fine time with that, especially if they traced her connection with the once and yet again President of the United States of America.

That had been one of the happier surprises of the year. In the aftermath of the Liverpool fiasco, Aronheimer's hopes of re-election had plunged close to vanishing point. Even after he weathered a powerful challenge from inside his own party at the primaries, his presidential rival's rampant isolationism had seemed to echo irresistibly the mood of the nation. The British had gone into this European union of their own free will: if they found the fire too hot, that was no good reason for American fingers to get burnt plucking out their chestnuts. Opinion polls put Aronheimer more than twenty points behind, and there were forecasts of a clean sweep of the states.

Over the late summer months he had gradually pulled back, but had still gone into the election as the conspicuous underdog. His unexpected victory had been due principally, Lucy judged, to the continuing inability of the Federation to make an end of the British insurrection, and to one monumental miscalculation in particular. An attempt at a double coup, in Belfast and Dublin, resulted in two disastrous failures, and an unusual demonstration of Irish unity against a more distant enemy than the one they had so long cherished. The day before polling in the United States, television screens showed a march of triumph down O'Connell Street, with the Union flag waving alongside the Irish tricolour.

Apart from diminishing hope of a quick solution to the off-shore problem, Europe had had its internal troubles. The Prague revolt was quickly suppressed, but was followed by a state of simmering tension in Warsaw, in which the Russians were taking an increasingly overt interest. And as far as Germany itself was concerned, apart from the

usual neo-Nazi riots directed at foreign workers, there had been more general disturbances in a number of cities.

One such was reported from Nuremberg, following the mysterious death of the boss of the Virtual empire, Dieter von Frohsteig. There were rumours of suicide, of assassination, of a heart attack in the course of a sexual orgy. This last, Michael felt, was highly unlikely, but he was fascinated by the subsequent news that the company had been taken over by von Frohsteig's nephew, Johann Frodsham. It would be interesting, some day, to find out exactly what had happened, and whether Gundula had survived the upheaval (he guessed she would); but that wasn't an urgent consideration. Other matters were more pressing. He had heard nothing of his father, but felt he would have his agreement on that point.

There was still a Federal High Commissioner in London, and what passed for a parliament. The original rump of less than a hundred members dwindled continuously, as more and more found their way to the new parliament in Edinburgh. On a briefing visit to the Commander in Chief, Resistance, Harry Porter, Michael had attended a session and listened to the Prime Minister addressing the House. He had sent in a note afterwards, not really expecting a reply, but she had summoned him that evening to her quarters in the Castle.

Helen Rackham had not changed much, but he had not expected she would have. As always, her manner alternated almost flirtatious amiability with casual brusqueness, and she did not offer him a drink. The only difference he noted was that her Australian accent had broadened, possibly to distance her from the Thatcherite image with which she had not infrequently been associated. The questions she put to him were brief but searching, and he soon worked out that she knew about Lucy, and that her principal objective was to probe the possibility of using her in some kind of diplomatic exercise. When he firmly declined on Lucy's behalf, she shrugged and let it drop.

He asked her if she had heard anything of Peter Graveny, and she looked surprised.

"He's dead. I thought you knew. In Liverpool."

Liverpool had been the scene of the heaviest fighting, and had recently been re-taken for the third time. Having grown accustomed to news of sudden death, the pang and automatic disbelief surprised him. "On his home territory, at least," he commented. "There are worse ways to go."

Helen Rackham laughed. "Certainly on his home territory, and I guess also the way he'd have chosen. He had a heart attack in a pub in Lime Street."

"You're a cold bitch, Helen."

It was the first time he had addressed her by name. Neither that nor the remark seemed to bother her. "I know," she acknowledged, "but sometimes that's what's needed. Tell your Lucy to contact me if she changes her mind."

Items of Sheaf news had been gleaned from local resistance members during their enforced sojourn at Fisherman's Quay. Sooter, he was told, had commandeered Bull House, a notable National Trust mansion close by the church, where he lived in style and with a show of authority. An oversized Carolingian shield had been nailed to the fumed-oak front door, and the Carolingian and Federal banners flew side by side above the Jacobean roof. Michael's informant on this point, a middle-aged man called Kim whose complexion suggested an ancestry more Mediterranean than English, though his accent was pure Sussex, added that Sooter had also acquired a chateau in the Dordogne, to which his new Rolls and a special Tunnel dispensation conveyed him most weekends.

"Not that it doos 'im much good," Kim said. "'Is wife always goes with 'im. As I reckon she will too when we kick the boogers out, and 'e makes a run for it."

Other sources reassured him about DD, who seemed to be well, and well content, in Mrs Bennett's Sunnyhill. Less welcome but not unexpected news was that Georgian House had been taken over as yet another Carolingian administration centre. One needed to be philosophical about that, Michael thought. The house had survived many changes of occupation and fortune since its foundation stone was laid early in the reign of Elizabeth I. It would survive this too, whether or not he did.

Outside the harbour the waters were as unpleasant as the skipper had warned. The boat rolled and wallowed as they headed east, battered by a beam sea. Up to this point the little fleet would have appeared perfectly normal for the time and place, but to continue in line rather than dispersing to various fishing grounds was likely to arouse suspicion. They had to rely on doused lights and the cover of darkness. As the boat rolled more heavily and his stomach heaved, Michael hoped his youthful sailing days would continue to stand him in good stead. He turned to the skipper, Dan Hayes. "How long would you say?"

"With this sea an hour, maybe hour and a quarter."

"And that will coincide with first light?"

"Near enough. We've lost the *Princess*."

"How do you know?" Without lights the other boats were invisible. "I can't see a thing."

"She packed in, coming out of the harbour. I didn't think that engine was going to do."

Only ten boats then, and a dozen fewer in the landing party. His stomach heaved again, as horizontal rain slashed like pellets of cold steel across the deck. The rational assessment he had been suppressing – that the scheme was totally hare-brained, more dependent on several kinds of luck than any kind of judgement – took over briefly before he hammered it down again. Rationality, at this stage of the game, was a dog to kennel.

He became aware of an alteration in course, with wind and waves now hitting them from the stern. "Is this it?" he asked Hayes.

"By my reckoning."

With navigation purely by compass and hard-earned experience of this stretch of coast, that was something else to take on trust. He asked: "And the tide's right to bring us close in?"

"You'll get your knees wet. Your bollocks too, most likely. But close enough."

He checked his Heckler-Koch inside its waterproof cover, and felt the adrenalin starting to pump. Peering towards the still invisible beach, he thought it was a bit like running onto the pitch at Twickenham. He could see surrounding faces more clearly. Lucy, incredibly, was smiling. He wanted to tell her he loved her, but knew it wouldn't do.

Less than an hour later, with daylight as full as could be expected on a dull December morning, Michael watched as the explosives team completed its work in the front carriage of the train standing at the southern departure platform. They came out with thumbs up, and shortly after that Steve, who had driven a Channel link train before the occupation, finished his work in the cab and jumped off as the wheels began to turn. Gathering speed, the train rolled towards the distant Tunnel mouth, and was swallowed up by the tiny far-off rectangle.

It had gone better than he could possibly have hoped. The first two guards had been surprised and killed silently – he would not forget

the yawn on a sleepy face just before his hand fastened on the gaping mouth and the knife slid home. A third was shot down before he could bring his Heckler-Koch to the ready. By that time they were inside the station, and the remainder of the guard, stumbling out bare-legged in their shirts from the guard-room on the platform, had not offered serious opposition. They themselves had suffered a man hit in the hand, a woman with a leg wound, neither life-threatening.

As he had urged Porter, in obtaining his sanction for this second assault on the Tunnel, the smaller the engagement, the greater the advantage of surprise. But there was more to it than that. In the eyes of Europeans, and even of some natives, the Tunnel had put an end to Britain's geographical isolation, and to the basic concept of insularity. The land link, as far as they were concerned, was in place, now and forever. Having Folkestone meant maintaining a foothold which was an extension of continental Europe; through it troops and supplies could flow, unchallenged and unrestricted – and with them, control. The occupied South and Midlands had essentially represented a defence in depth of that vital bastion. Holding on to it, one could forget about the troublesome nuisance of the sea.

But the sea, with its perils and possibilities, remained deep-rooted in the hearts of the islanders, and in their thinking. Thousands of years of watching and learning, of calculating maritime risks and stratagems, were not to be uprooted by a sudden storm of technology. If it had been us holding Calais instead, Michael thought, I don't think we'd have fallen for this.

The *crump* was faint in the distance, but its insignificance was belied by the eruption, seconds later, at the mouth of the Tunnel. A swelling cloud of grey-brown dust burst out and debris whirled through the air. Someone cheered, and others joined in raggedly, conscious of achievement but still unsure just what had been achieved.

As to that, Michael felt reasonably confident. Almost certainly the Tunnel would not have been breached by the sea: defence against explosion had been a major consideration in its planning. But it must have suffered sufficient damage to produce a total blockage – now, and at a conservative estimate, for weeks, perhaps months ahead. There would be time enough for Porter's counter-offensive to sweep the occupying Euro troops, discouraged and no longer reinforced, into surrender or the Channel.

What followed would lie, as all events ultimately lay, with the

goddess Fortuna. But she was, he hoped, a deity who would take some account of effort. It was highly unlikely that Aronheimer would authorize another landing of US troops, but with Britain firmly back in British hands it would be surprising if he failed to give diplomatic recognition to an independent United Kingdom.

International affairs could anyway be left to themselves; personal survival mattered now. Steve had been checking the train on the opposite platform. After a final burst of fire at the guardhouse, to keep the disarmed Euro troops quiet, they climbed aboard and it headed north. Lucy hung onto Michael's arm, and he hugged her. The battle was over, and warriors could take their ease.

They were several miles north by the time the helicopter gunships came in view, heading towards Folkestone from their Heathrow base.

"Just as well you decided against a beach pickup," Lucy said. "We'd have been a sitting-duck target."

Michael nodded: another risk had been that they might strafe the train, but they stayed on course. The Euro troops would be expecting to deal with the train at Ashford, where a barrier would be going up, if not already in place.

Lucy said: "I didn't fancy another sea trip right now, anyway. Nausea should serve a better cause."

"Such as?"

The train was slowing to a halt. All round them, wooded and meadowed, soggy with rain, occupied only by gazing sheep, lay the Kent countryside, a landscape in which to disperse and be lost. She touched him lightly.

"Pregnancy was what I had in mind." ●

The Archive

Introduction

These pages list information and material of interest to SF readers. Please send items to the address on page 2. While I will endeavour to include as many items as possible, a listing here cannot be guaranteed.

Books

J. G. Ballard - The Terminal Beach
(Phoenix; 2001; B-pbk; 221 pp.; ISBN 0-575-40131-1; £6.99)

A mainstream outing for this 60s SF collection. I wish I had time to reread both it and the one below: I'm sure I would get much more out of the stories nowadays than when I first read them in my late teens – when they occasionally perplexed me. That said, I still remember ***The Drowned Giant*** vividly. An excellent modern fantasy worth the price of the book by itself.

J. G. Ballard - The Voices of Time
(Phoenix; 2001; B-pbk; 197 pp.; ISBN 0-575-40130-3; £6.99)

Another 60s collection: all the stories were published between 1960 and 1962, mostly in ***New Worlds*** and ***Science Fantasy***. One of the two exceptions, ***The Garden of Time***, from ***F&SF***, is one of the earliest SF stories I can remember reading.

Stephen Baxter - Icebones
(Gollancz; 2001; C-pbk; 278 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07214-8; £9.99)

Third novel in this mammoth (sorry, 'Mammoth') series.

Stephen Baxter - Reality Dust
(PS Publishing; 2000; B-pbk; 67 pp.; ISBN 1-902880-10-2; £8.00)

This novella is one of Stephen Baxter's 'Xeelee' series and the events in it occur after those of ***Cadre Siblings*** – the alien Qax have departed Earth and the Green Army are hunting down 'jasofts' – collaborators.

The story gets off to a cracking start and soon heads off to Callisto, where a colony of 'Pharaohs' – elite jasofts – are believed to be in hiding. The superscience maguffin found on Callisto that most of the story revolves around didn't entirely convince me but, overall, it's a solid enough read. Introduction from Greg Bear.

Greg Bear - Blood Music
(Gollancz; 2001; B-pbk; 262 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-762-4; £6.99)

This Bio-SF novel is #40 in the SF Masterworks series. It sports a particularly striking cover in a series that already has much better artwork than most SF books.

James Blish - The Seedling Stars
(Gollancz; 2001; C-pbk; 185 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07239-3; £9.99)

Collectors' series novel from 1957 about 'Adapted Men' that is a fix-up of five stories including the excellent ***Surface Tension***.

Eric Brown - A Writer's Life
(PS Publishing; 2001; B-pbk; pp.; ISBN 1-902-880-20X; £8.00)

This new novella from Eric is one of the first of this year's entries from the successful PS Publishing line. More autobiographical than his previous work (one presumes) it tells of a Northern writer and his discovery of similarities in the work of two writers that lived several decades apart. He is driven to investigate whether this is plagiarism or something more. The story is told against a convincing local background and, balancing this and the plot, is his somewhat strained relationship with a divorced mother of two. If I have a minor criticism of this it is that the ending is a fairly standard SFnal one. However, this is not a big problem: the pleasure gained from this is in the journey, not the arrival. Recommended. (Oh yes, there's also an introduction from Paul di Filippo that made me think that it was going to be a fantasy story rather than SF – but it serves its purpose well enough.)

Eric Brown - New York Nights
(Gollancz; 2001; A-pbk; 327 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-782-9; £6.99)

First novel in a new trilogy. Reviewed in ***Spectrum SF*** #4.

Chris Bunch - Corsair
(Orbit; 2001; C-pbk; 406 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-034-2; £10.99)

Sea-borne fantasy novel.

Orson Scott Card - Heartfire
(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 336 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-032-6; £6.99)

Fifth volume in 'The Tales of Alvin Maker' fantasy series.

Arthur C. Clarke - The City and the Stars
(Gollancz; 2001; B-pbk; 255 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-763-2; £6.99)

This 1956 novel is #39 in the SF Masterworks series. My complaint about some of the novels in this series has been that some of them are cracked up to be better than they are. Here, not even that applies: this novel is distinctly average. The story of Alvin, and his journey from

the enclosed city of Diaspar out into the Galaxy, is at best unengaging and at worst tedious.

David Farland - Wizardborn

(Earthlight; 2001; C-pbk; 424pp.; ISBN 0-684-86061-9; £10.00)

Fantasy novel. Book 3 of 'The Runelords'.

David Garnett - Space Wasters

(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 375 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-012-1; £6.99)

Comic SF novel from a long-time SF writer and one of the better original anthology editors of recent years. (My favourite SF alternate-world fantasy is one where he and Peter Crowther each have the editorship of a monthly SF magazine, say *New Worlds* and *Science Fantasy* by choice, and I'm sitting in my back garden, feet up and reading. One day, when I win the lottery…)

Julia Gray - The Jasper Forest

(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 567 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-057-1; £6.99)

Fantasy novel. Book 2 of 'The Guardian Cycle'.

Jon Courtenay Grimwood - Pashazade: The First Arabesk

(Earthlight; 2001; Hdbk; 326 pp.; £12.99; ISBN 0-7432-0284-8)

First novel in a new trilogy. This has as its background an alternate world where Germany won WWI and the Ottoman Empire still dominates the Middle East. Not that this really matters, though, as after a certain amount of attention at the start of the novel this fades into the background fairly quickly. You would be hard put to distinguish the setting from a more general futuristic North African one. All of which begs the question: why bother in the first place?

The plot? A young man called Raf arrives in El Iskandryia from America to discover he is a son of royalty. He stays with his aunt and finds that a marriage has been arranged for him. He rejects the bride, and shortly after this his aunt is killed. Things become more difficult for him and he goes on the run, searching for the truth. In tow are his nine-year-old niece; Zara, the bride he rejected; and the Fox: an avatar his implant generates (there is considerable flashback in the novel showing us his past but it never convincingly adds up).

In conclusion, the novel can be summed up as a cyberpunk-light murder mystery. For the first part this works out reasonably well. The main problem I had with the rest of it was that it was too long, with a definite dead-spot in the middle. By the time I'd reached the end I barely cared about the conclusion. More generally, it has the feel of a novel that needed another draft.

I must confess to being rather disappointed with this, but that was probably because this is the first novel I have read by this writer and had hoped for much better. Without this preconception, I'd probably have said it comes out overall as OK.

Joe Haldeman - Forever Free

(Millennium; 2000; A-pbk; 277 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-931-7; £5.99)

This eagerly awaited sequel to the Hugo and Nebula award winning novel, ***The Forever War***, starts with the human survivors of that war. They are overseen by two groups: the evolved group-mind version of humanity called Man, and the erstwhile enemy of humanity, the alien Taurans. This group of survivors is imprisoned on a planet called Middle Finger: the only way off is to become a Man. Needless to say, our malcontents are unhappy with the status quo and start plotting to steal a starship and get off-planet.

When this story gets going it is quite a good read but there are a couple of problems. The first (and minor one) is that it takes the first three chapters to get moving. Until then, it reads very much like a novel started by a writer just back from a long holiday and taking his time to get started. The second problem manifests itself much further on in the book. Having stolen the spaceship and set out, our small band experiences the anomaly of the anti-matter in their star-drive suddenly disappearing. They are forced to abandon the ship, go into suspended animation in the escape ships and return to Middle Finger.

I started to get a little concerned at this point because this event occurs at the three-quarter way mark and I wondered how Haldeman was going to manage to tie the story up. I shouldn't have worried though because he doesn't. Enter a *deus ex machina* ending that might as well have arrived from Greek Theatre in its own starship. Disappointing finish from such a talented writer.

In conclusion, slow start, lousy ending and debatable whether it's worth getting for the readable central section.

Robert A. Heinlein - Orphans of the Sky

(Gollancz; 2001; C-pbk; 187 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07237-7; £9.99)

Another Collectors' series re-issue that makes me realise I seem to have missed out on swathes of Heinlein – probably the fault of ***Stranger in a Strange Land***, which I only managed to get half-way through.

Robin Hobb - Ship of Destiny

(Voyager; 2001; A-pbk; 903 pp.; ISBN 0-00-649887-6; £6.99)

Big fantasy novel. Book 3 of 'The Liveship Traders'.

Tom Holt - Nothing But Blue Skies
(Orbit; 2001; Hdbk; 317 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-040-7; £15.99)

New comic fantasy novel about an estate agent who is also an ancient Chinese water-dragon.

Tom Holt - Valhalla
(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 277 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-042-3; £5.99)

Recent comic fantasy novel about the commercialisation of Valhalla.

Robert E. Howard - The Conan Chronicles 2: The Hour of the Dragon
(Gollancz; 2001; B-pbk; 575 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-747-0; £7.99)

Second volume of Conan stories in what I suspect is a labour of love from Stephen Jones, who contributes the long introduction. #16 in the Fantasy Masterworks series.

Ian Irvine - Dark is the Moon
(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 674 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-038-5; £6.99)

Fantasy novel. Volume 3 of 'The View from the Mirror'.

Stephen Jones (ed.) - Best New Horror 11
(Robinson; 2000; B-pbk; 572 pp.; ISBN 1-84119-167-1; £6.99)

Twenty-one stories fill out this year's collection of Horror and Dark Fantasy from Stephen Jones and I liked around half of them – not a bad score for an anthology at all, and a lot better than last year's volume.

There are three novellas this time. However, unlike last year, they are not the best fiction in the book. Having said that, I quite liked David Case's readable ***Jimmy***, thanks to the writer's colourful characterisations and American small-town setting although the story, about a monster born of human parents by way of a scientist's experiment, is somewhat 1950s ***F&SF*** fare. I found Peter Straub's ***Pork Pie Hat*** (what seems to be a minor revision of a 1994 novella reprinted in 1999) worth reading, too. The story of a man recounting a tale about a legendary jazz musician he once interviewed flags somewhat at the end, though, as a number of possibly supernatural events in the narrative appear to have a mundane solution. The third novella, Tim Lebbon's ***White***, does not entirely work. It's an OK read, I guess, about a group of people trapped in a house cut-off by a snowstorm, while something outside picks them off one by one. The problem with this (and its global everything-going-to-hell background) is that the moment you stop to think about matters, it doesn't really make any sense.

The two strongest stories in the book are of novelette length. The better is F. Paul Wilson's ***Aftershock***. This tells of a woman who is brought into hospital after having been struck by lightning for a second

time. Her doctor investigates further and finds out that she is actively trying to be hit by lightning as it enables her to contact her dead son... This has an original idea and is well told – as is Gemma Files' ***The Emperor's Old Bones***. This tells of a young boy in WWII Shanghai (shades of J. G. Ballard) and a woman who rescues, uses and protects him throughout the rest of the war. The second half of the story moves to the present day when he tracks her down. Both parts of the story pivot around a life-extending Chinese dish known as 'The Emperor's Old Bones'.

There are other stories that I'd classify as, to a greater or lesser extent, 'good', including the contributions from Kim Newman, Caitlin R. Kiernan (not much in the way of story but good atmosphere and setting), Thomas Tessier, Graham Masterton, Michael Marshall Smith (this one works to its own logic but is about a man stuck in a job he hates – the kind of thing a number of us will empathise with) and Paul J. MacAuley.

Also-rans come from T. E. D. Klein, David J. Schow, Neil Gaiman and Steve Rasnic Tem (his second story at the end of the volume). These all succeed in some ways but fail in others. The stories I didn't like come from Steve Rasnic Tem, James Herbert (regardless of what the author says in the introduction, this novel extract does not stand on its own), Ramsey Campbell (working to his own idea of what a horror story should be again and, I would venture, at too great a length), Terry Lamsley, Michael Marano (this AIDS tale would have seemed routine in any late eighties horror anthology – what it is doing in this volume beats me) and Gene Wolfe (an inconsequential squib).

The volume also contains the usual Introduction, which, once again, would function better as a shorter piece, plus a separate, itemised index of published novels. There is also the Necrology, which tells us more about Stephen Jones and Kim Newman's love of *Variety* and movie minutiae than what we really need to know about who joined the horror field's dead (I almost typed 'undead') this year. Notwithstanding these last two minor (and now annual) grumps, worth getting.

Paul Kearny - The Second Empire
(Gollancz; 2001; A-pbk; 294 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-751-9; £5.99)

Fantasy novel. Book 4 in 'The Monarchies of God'.

Katherine Kerr & Kate Daniel - Polar City Nightmare
(Gollancz; 2001; A-pbk; ISBN 1-85798-783-7; £6.99)

SF novel: 'political thriller set in a future at once familiar and alien'.

Miller Lau - Talisker
(Earthlight; 2001; A-pbk; 498 pp.; ISBN 0-7434-0893-4; £6.99)
Fantasy novel. Book one of 'The Last Clansman'.
Paul McAuley - The Secret of Life
(Voyager; 2001; Hdbk; 391 pp.; ISBN 0-00-225904-4; £16.99)
The first SF novel from McAuley's new publisher. Biotechnology novel set partially on Mars, and which I'll probably review next issue.
Ian McDonald - Tendeléo's Story
(PS Publishing; 2000; B-pbk; 91 pp.; ISBN 1-902880-12-9; £8.00)
This novella tells of a young African woman who is driven from her village by the UN after the surrounding countryside is infected by an alien growth that arrives from space. Of course, the meat of the story concerns the troubled times that come before and after that event.
This is a good piece of work, in particular its scenes of a troubled African continent, its vivid picture of the alien growths, and at the end, when the natives end up in the heart of this strange intrusion, transcending their past.
This novella is part of the author's 'Chaga' series which, according to Robert Silverberg's introduction, consists of the novelette *Toward Kilimanjaro*, and the novels *Chaga* (an expansion of that novelette) and *Kirinya*. As I liked both *Toward Kilimanjaro* and *Tenedeléo's Story* more than somewhat, the novels go on my 'To be read' list. For those that have already read them, more novellas in this series are rumoured.
Finally, I would have to agree with David Mathew's comments in a recent *Interzone* review about the introductions to these novellas: Silverberg's is one of the better of a decidedly mixed bunch.
Phillip Mann - The Eye of the Queen
(Gollancz; 2001; C-pbk; 264 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07238-5; £9.99)
Collectors' series novel from 1982 about an alien culture.
John Marco - The Saints of the Sword
(Gollancz; 2001; Hdbk; 545 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07160-5; £12.99)
Fantasy novel. Book 3 of 'Tyrants and Kings'.
L. E. Modesitt Jr. - Magi'I of Cyador
(Orbit; 2001; A-pbk; 544 pp.; ISBN 1-84149-027-X; £6.99)
New fantasy novel in the 'Saga of Reduce'.
Michael Moorcock - Elric
(Gollancz; 2001; B-pbk; 416 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-743-8; £6.99)
Sword and Sorcery omnibus of two 'Elric' novels, *The Stealer of Souls* and *Stormbringer*. This appears to be an attempt to present (like

Robert E. Howard's 'Conan') an essential collection of a series which is much longer. Most of the stories here were originally published in *Science Fantasy* in the early sixties, although I suspect they have been much revised since then. #17 in the Fantasy Masterworks series.

Linda Nagata - Vast

(Gollancz; 2001; A-pbk; 359 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-745-4; £6.99)

Reprint of a 1998 space opera published last year in this country. The tiny type is photo-reduced from the hardback.

Adam Nichols - The Curer

(Gollancz; 2001; A-pbk; 440 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-531-1; £6.99)

Fantasy. Book 3 in 'The Whiteblade Saga'.

K. J. Parker - Shadow

(Orbit: 2001; C-pbk; 572pp.; ISBN 1-84149-019-9; £10.99)

Fantasy novel. First in 'The Scavenger Trilogy'.

Frederik Pohl - Jem

(Gollancz; 2001; B-pbk; 300 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-789-6; £6.99)

This SF Masterworks novel (#41) was the third that appeared from Fred Pohl after he restarted writing novels in the mid-70s. Coming shortly after *Man Plus* and *Gateway*, it should have been a must-read for me but I made the mistake of waiting for the magazine *Galaxy* to finish the serialisation (it stopped publication just as the last part was due). I believe the final part did appear, after another publisher took over the magazine, but by then I'd moved on. Catch-up time.

Darrell Schweitzer - Windows of the Imagination

(Wildside Press; 2000; C-pbk; 208 pp.; ISBN 1-880448-60-2; $16.00)

I had a less than positive response to this collection of 29 essays on SF, fantasy and horror-related issues when I first started reading it. Indeed, after reading the first half-dozen or so I put it down and it was two or three months before I got back into it. These initial essays are on subjects such as Dianetics, UFOs – sceptical essays, I suppose you would call them. Whatever, they did not ring my bell – probably because articles debunking nonsense can seem rather irrelevant.

However, when I picked up the book again, I found that most of it is given over to articles more directly focused on the mainstream of fantasy, and to a lesser extent, science fiction. Here, Schweitzer's enthusiasm about and knowledge of the likes of Lovecraft, Dunsany and many others shines through. Worth a look. (Wildside Press's address is PO Box 45, Gillette, NJ 07933-0045, USA or www.wildsidepress.com)

Sheri S. Tepper - Fresco
(Gollancz; 2001; C-pbk 406 pp.; ISBN 0-575-07192-3; £10.99)
SF novel about a First Contact.
Sheri S. Tepper - Singer from the Sea
(Gollancz; 2001; A-pbk 512 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-749-7; £6.99)
Paperback edition of a SF hardcover from last year.
H. G. Wells - The First Men in the Moon
(Gollancz; 2001; B-pbk; 196 pp.; ISBN 1-85798-746-2; £6.99)
A centenary edition of this novel which is #38 in the SF Masterworks series. Introduction from Arthur C. Clarke.
Tad Williams - Sea of Silver Light
(Orbit; 2001; Hdbk; 922 pp.; ISBN 1-85723-991-1; £17.99)
Volume four, and the conclusion, of the 'Otherland' series.

Magazines

Analog - May 2000
(Large digest; 144 pp.; ISSN 1059-2113; £2.50/$3.50, 11 issue UK subscription $37.97 (~£25); Analog, PO Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80323-4625, USA; www.analog.com)

Best stories this issue are from Stephen Baxter and Allen Steele. Both are minor and somewhat unlikely but readable. Baxter's ***Sheena 5*** is about a sentient squid which is used as an astronaut, and Steele's ***Agape Among the Robots*** is a charming enough tale of two competing scientists of the opposite sex developing robots. Other fiction from Bud Sparhawk, Kij Johnson, Dave Creek, Pauline Ashwell and Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff. Various non-fiction.

Fantasy and Science Fiction - September 2000
(Digest; 160 pp.; ISSN 1095-8258; $3.50, 11 issue UK subscription $37.97 (~£25); Mercury Press, 143 Cream Hill Road, West Cornwall, CT 06796-9975, USA; www.sfsite.com/fsf/)

Two stories stand out this issue: ***The Alien Abduction***, a novelette by James L. Cambias, and Michael Blumlein's short story ***Fidelity: A Primer***.

James L Cambias caught my attention a few months ago with his story in the April 1999 *F&SF* (***A Diagram of Rapture***, reviewed in ***Spectrum SF*** #3). I am pleased to say that his new story about an alien 'liberated' by eco-terrorists is equally as good. It is well plotted and his drawing of characters is skilled. I look forward to his next appearance with some anticipation.

The short story from Michael Blumlein is billed as being from the 'borderlands of the fantastic'. From the evidence, this location might also be called 'Mainstream City' because it sure isn't SF or fantasy. Not that I have a problem with that, I hasten to add. The editor, Gordon Van Gelder, has slipped in the odd mainstream piece before and that's OK – *F&SF* is the kind of mag where this isn't particularly out of place. And doubly so in this case. ***Fidelity: A Primer*** is a wise, accomplished story about two couples and the attraction that develops between the wife of one and the husband of the other.

One other novelette by Jack Cady and short stories from Dale Bailey, Mark W. Tiedemann, Ray Vukcevich, Robert Sheckley and Shelia Finch. Interesting science column on risk from Gregory Benford.

Interzone #159 - September 2000

(Short A4; 64 pp.; ISSN 0264-3596; £3.00, 12 issue UK subscription £34; 217 Preston Drove, Brighton, BN1 6FL or at www.sfsite.com/interzone)

This month's lead novelette, ***Incunabula***, is another in Richard Calder's ongoing generational 'Lord Soho' series. Like the last, it is overlong and this one also suffers from a distinctly wobbly plot. It tells of Richard Pike, the would-be sixth Lord Soho, and the shenanigans that surround his wedding night and his master's planned *droit de seigneur* with his bride. An OK read, I guess. Other stories by Catherine S. McMullen, Stuart Falconer, Zoran Zivkovic and Dominic Green.

The non-fiction includes an essay by Gary Westfahl about Harlan Ellison's ***Last Dangerous Visions*** project (or perhaps non-project would be more accurate). In this he makes the asinine suggestion that the reason for the volume's non-appearance is that Ellison realises that the stories contained therein are no good and he wants to avoid the embarrassment of publishing an inferior product. Not a trace of irony in any of this (he was asked in another forum if it was tongue-in-cheek).

It doesn't seem to have occurred to Westfahl that this theory does not explain why certain writers have had, allegedly, so much trouble trying to reclaim their work, or that Ellison has been reported to have been soliciting new material recently (although this information is second-hand). Mind you, what should we expect from a column that is prefaced by the comment: 'I commit these speculations to print with no malicious intent, but only because I regularly publish commentaries on science fiction, and I can't think of anything else to write about at the moment.' Disappointing filler from a usually stimulating essayist.

Interzone #160 - October 2000

Novelettes from Barrington J. Bayley (unusual alien biology in *The Worms of Hess*) and Jean-Claude Dunyach (gaslight pulp in *Orchids in the Night*). Short stories by Liz Williams, Zoran Zivkovic and Chris Beckett. Liz William's *The Blood Thieves* is the most promising, a story that interestingly mixes Icelandic fairies (to oversimplify matters) and modern medicine. Unfortunately, the ending is a little rushed, too pat.

Interviews with Ben Jeapes (wherein he talks about the launch of his new publishing company, The Big Engine) and Steven Gould & Laura J. Mixon.

Interzone #161 - November 2000

There is another chunk of Richard Calder's ongoing series in this issue. This one, *The Lady of the Carnelias*, is OK but I thought it was, like some of the others, overblown. I would also have to question the wisdom of running so many long (they all run to 15,000 words or more) series novelettes so close together. It's fine if you like these but what about the readers that don't? (And yes, I can hear the greenhouse glass tinkling in the background.)

Short stories from by Sarah Singleton, Zoran Zivkovic, Barrington J. Bayley and Alexander Glass. The contributions from Singleton and Zivokovic are both quite good. Singleton's *Ebb Tide* is about a dead mermaid and the actions of a handful of local people. There is not much in the way of a plot here, but it shows good verisimilitude. Zivkovic's *The Atelier* is another in his series of metaphysical tales that have appeared in *Interzone* recently. Better than the rest, it is also more ambitious and manages to draw all the stories together. A fitting capstone to his upcoming collection, *Impossible Encounters*.

Interzone #162 - December 2000

This issue has a good, original story by Alexander Glass, *The Watcher's Curse*. This novelette tells of a strange world of nodes and arcs, populated by The Grey Man, the Bodiless and the Dancers. Reminded me a little of the type of thing that Zelazny did occasionally, but it has its own sensibilities. Other stories by Mark Dunn, Dominic Green, Tony Ballantyne and George Zebrowski. Interview with Walter Jon Williams plus other non-fiction and reviews.

Department of Nitpicks: Keith Roberts' obituary, written by editor David Pringle, includes the line: '...he first made his reputation in the mid-to-late 1960s in the pages of *Science Fantasy/Impulse* and *New Worlds* (for both of which he also drew covers)'. This is not the first

time (and it probably won't be the last) that Roberts seems to have been wrongly co-opted to become a *New Worlds* writer during this particular period. The fact of the matter is that Roberts' 1964-69 fiction consisted of 26 appearances (8 pseudonymously)in *Science Fantasy/Impulse/SF Impulse*, 9 (3 pseudonymously) in *New Writings in SF*, 3 in *New Worlds*, one in *F&SF*, one in *Worlds of Tomorrow* and two in the anthologies *Orbit 1* and *The Devil His Due*. I think this (admittedly quick) count shows the true state of affairs. Not that any of this remotely matters to anyone but me, I suppose, but there you go.

By the by, one of the three stories published in *New Worlds*, *Coronda* (#170, January 1967) was published there as Roberts had asked Michael Moorcock permission to write a story set in the world of *The Ice Schooner*, which itself was in the process of being serialised in *SF Impulse*. A very early case of SF sharecropping and one that would result in the production not only of *Coronda* but of *The Wreck of the Kissing Bitch* (*Warlords and Warriors*, 1971; *F&SF* January 1971). Sadly, both are currently uncollected in any Roberts volume. I like all three 'Ice Schooner' tales more than somewhat: starting point for a semi-original anthology anybody?

Interzone #163 - January 2001

Best of the issue is Eric Brown's novelette, *The Children of Winter*. He's showing his lighter side in this story (as he did in *Destiny on Tartarus* in *Spectrum SF* #2) and it tells of a youngster falling in love on an alien planet. Other stories by George Zebrowski (related to his story last issue), James Lovegrove, Tony Ballantyne and Paul di Filippo. Interviews with Juliet McKenna and Charles de Lint plus the usual non-fiction and reviews.

Interzone #164 - February 2001

Fiction from Richard Calder (*The Nephilim*, another novelette in the on-going series), Stephen Baxter, Ruaridh Pringle, Alexander Glass and Stephen Dedman. Interview with Stephen Baxter and other non-fiction.

Interzone #165 - March 2001

Special John Christopher issue that will be of interest to those who have been following his novel in these pages. There is a long interview with Paul Brazier, with, I thought, less emphasis on SF than there might have been. On the other hand, it reveals what a widely published writer Christopher is.

There is also a worthy reprint by him in this issue (*Rendezvous* from

1966), a ghost story I suppose you would call it. One or two of the other tales are directly influenced by Christopher: Simon Ings' *Myxomatosis* is a good piece about a determined survivalist which makes explicit reference to *The Death of Grass*.

The other fiction is provided by Matt Colburn, Nigel Brown, John Whitbourn and Graham Joyce. Nigel Brown's story *Under the Overlight* is the best of these, a story about a giant, floating vegetable mass in the atmosphere of Uranus. A bit too *Non-Stop*-ish in setting, it also explains a little more than it needs to, but it is a vivid read and I look forward to seeing more from this writer.

This issue's non-fiction also has 'TV and media commentary' by Evelyn Lewes which comments on a number of TV serials. I thought the inclusion of *Ally McBeal* was stretching matters a bit!

SciFiction 3 - July 2000

(http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/archive.html)

This month's postings comprise *Goddesses*, a long novella (80 pp.) by Linda Nagata and two reprints, *Nine Hundred Grandmothers* by R. A. Lafferty and *Casey Agonistes* by Richard McKenna. These last two had been removed from the site when I last looked.

The novella is set in a near-future India and intertwines several realistic characters with a number of scientific developments (uterine implants that give selected-sex babies, bio-remediation projects, etc.). The main developments centre on Michael Fielding, an aid director, and Rajban, a homeless fifteen-year-old whom he takes in off the street. Good story and well worth a look, although I'm not sure I rate it quite as highly as those who voted it the 2001 Nebula novella award.

The Lafferty is a pleasant enough read about aliens that have hundreds of generations of grandparents but has an ending that lost me completely. The McKenna is OK, a strange story of what would seem to be consensual hallucination or reality-alteration in a TB ward.

The 'classics' continue to be a mixed bunch. •

Next Issue

The next issue will be dated October 2001.

The novel I have lined up (which will probably appear in three parts) is a new work from Charles Stross. Currently untitled (but Spooks and The Atrocity Archive are in the running) it tells of a ultra-secret part of the British security establishment called 'The Laundry'. This descendant of the WWII OSS have to deal with some particularly unpleasant and potentially Universe-threatening phenomena. Those of you who remember his Best New SF #14 choice, A Colder War, will find a new spin on some of the ideas touched upon in that story. You'll love it!

Also on hand is a short story from new (to SF) writer Josh Lacey called The Pilgrim.

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